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When the Clock Strikes Z

2

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: New BeginningZ](#)

[Chapter 1: High HopeZ](#)

[Chapter 2: Critical CrossroadZ](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color IllustrationZ](#)

[Bonus Textless IllustrationZ](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

When the Clock StrikesZ



Table of Contents

Prologue: New BeginningZ

Chapter 1: High HopeZ

Chapter 2: Critical CrossroadZ

Epilogue

Prologue: New BeginningZ

There I was, in a dimly lit room, plunging into the final preparations. It wasn't anything too exciting—just me going over a checklist. High-level scientific concepts were well above my pay grade. I just did as I was told.

"Everything's in order."

"*Good work,*" replied the AI on the other side of the screen.

Raven was a character once tasked with assisting *Field Battle's* many players. Back then, Raven hadn't been anywhere near advanced enough to qualify as a true AI. She'd been nothing more than a kids' plaything who could, at best, pick out a contextually appropriate, automated response. The Raven in the miniature display, however, was smart enough to respond to my muttering with kind words.

As expected of an AI made by the one and only Shiiko Katsura.

Granted, Shiiko'd had a preexisting sample to go off of, but to create something this impressive with limited time and resources was a monumental feat made possible only by her exceptional talent.

Also, there was a good reason for why this AI had the original Raven's voice and appearance—apparently, having a prebuilt receptacle at the send-off point would boost our chances of success and use up less data, or something along those lines.

"Off you go now," I said, rolling my aching shoulders. "You've got a big job ahead of you. Make it count."

Raven nodded. "*I will.*"

"And the password?"

"Survive, and humanity may flourish once again."

"Perfect." Smiling, I hit the return key.

Raven froze, and a progress window that read "Transferring data..." popped up on the OLED display.

That was all there was to it. No drama, no excitement, nothing.

The progress bar slowly filled up. I idly watched it fill all the way... or at least, that had been the plan.

From outside of the abandoned building I was holed up in, I could hear some sort of rubble come crashing down. Thanks to my extraordinary instincts, honed through countless experiences, I already knew...

It was *them*.

"Give me a break..."

I just finished the job of a lifetime. Lemme savor the moment a little bit, will ya?

I grabbed the Barrett M82A1 resting against the wall. It had originally been intended to be a bolt-action sniper rifle, and it showed. The gun had a long barrel, small magazine size, and an unwieldy frame, making it unfit for CQB and generally just annoying to use. I'd have thrown it away if it

weren't for the fact that it was the only gun I had on hand that could take those bastards down in one shot with its .50 BMG cartridges.

"Well then."

There's a lot I still don't fully understand, but right now, all I have to do is wait for some results. It's a real gamble, but it's a gamble worth taking.

I sighed, slinging my backpack full of homemade Molotovs over my shoulders.

Humanlike figures passed through the shimmering veil of heat, the midsummer sun shining down on them. I couldn't quite make them out because of the glare, but I knew they were anything but human.

"The happiest of happy endings is in reach. No backing out now," I muttered, pulling on the Barrett's reload handle.

Chapter 1: High HopeZ

The sea was calm and the sun was mild as our inflatable boat glided swiftly across the water, its engine humming quietly in the rear.

Almost warm enough to swim in.

I pulled my hand out of the water and took a deep breath of the salty sea air. Unlike the polluted, garbage-ridden water around the harbor, the seawater here smelled crisp and clean. It was also crystal clear, judging from the handful I had scooped up.

Nothing but peace and quiet. The sea was the same as always.

Sure, there might be occasional storms at sea, or the water up north might freeze here and there, but that was just the natural order of things. Fundamentally speaking, nothing out here had changed. Unlike on the mainland, there wasn't much to lose.

"I feel safer out here than I did back there. Fancy that," I muttered with a half smile.

No mutilated corpses to sully the eyes. No dreary groaning to defile the ears.

Most postapocalyptic settings in movies, anime, novels, manga, games, and virtually any other medium tended to depict a doomsday scenario where all the seas had dried up.

Good thing that isn't happening anytime soon.

We were well past the point of environmental destruction, let alone nuclear war.

Peace at last... but is it meaningful if there's no one around to enjoy it? Who knows.

Hiroaki Dewa here. Seventeen, high school dropout, former recluse and hardcore VRFPS gamer currently serving as a guerilla soldier... or something like that. Actually, what's the point of introductions now that there's no one to introduce myself to? What with the collapse of human civilization and all.

"Yo, Otoha." I turned to face my fellow passenger, who was sitting next to the engine. "Can zombies swim?"

"It depends," she replied flatly.

Otoha had black, shoulder-length hair cut in a... what's that again? A bob? Sure, that must've been it. Her big, round eyes were offset by a set of red-framed glasses.

She was quite pretty, but it was hard to savor this particular quality with her aloof manner, nonexistent makeup, and deadpan expression always getting in the way. Unfortunately, she cared little about how she looked to other people.

Otoha Judou, also seventeen. She's my partner, my lifesaver, and an expert in all aspects of lumbering corpses—a.k.a. zombies. In short, she's a weirdo.

*In her younger years, she developed a worryingly fervent fondness for zombies, which inspired her to amass a treasure trove of zombie-related knowledge. The other day, I was like, "How many zombie movies have you seen?" Didn't mean anything by it. Had no idea she was going to list over a hundred in chronological order, from the first feature-length zombie film *White Zombie* and cult classics such as *Night of the Living Dead* all the way up to modern stuff like *Kabaneri of the Iron Fortress*.*

I shouldn't rag on her too hard, though; she saved my life, after all. The fact that I'm still alive and kicking in this zombie-infested world of ours is all thanks to Otoha. I don't really show it, since that'd probably make it weird, but I have a lot of respect for her and I'm deeply grateful for all that she's done for me.

"The ones in the *House of the Dead* can." Otoha tilted her head ever so slightly, as though perusing through the filing cabinets of zombie data inside her mind. "*Swiss Army Man* had zombies that could traverse water as fast as a jet ski."

"How the hell did that work?"

Honestly, if I saw a zombie rushing toward me that fast in the water, I'd definitely make a liquid contribution of my own.

"*Zombie Lake* had undead Nazis rising from their watery graves." Zombies couldn't drown, so the ones that got swept away by the waves usually washed up on remote islands. "Then there's *Rise of the Zombies...*"

With that face, you look kind of like a zombie yourself sometimes.

"They're dead, meaning they can't drown. Gotcha."

There was no one around apart from us—no ships in the distance, no swimmers, and no floaters for that matter. Keeping clear of floating bodies was generally a smart move because you never knew when one might spring back to life. Assuming that a corpse was going to stay dead was an easy way to get killed.

"If the infection is indeed viral, it's possible there might be zombie birds or zombie fish."

"Sounds great," I said sarcastically. A shiver ran down my spine as I imagined a bloated, swollen corpse at sea being picked apart by birds. I had seen my fair share of decaying corpses over the past month or so, but there was something about a bloated corpse in particular that just rubbed me the wrong way.

Isn't it gas buildup in the intestines that causes stomach bloat?

"Zombies come in all shapes and sizes. You just need to know where to look."

What I really need to know is whether or not they exist in reality.

If the zombies Otoha had just listed really did exist, we'd be in quite the pickle. There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, just water as far as the eye could see.

We could try outswimming them, though it's unlikely we'd succeed. Regular zombies would be easy to breeze past, but those zooming zombies at jet-ski speeds? Fat chance.

At that moment, a buoy, rocking along to the gentle waves, came into view. This was the sole reason we'd spent all that time procuring a boat.

"Kill the engine."

Otoha nodded and hit the switch. A few seconds later, the boat lost all its kinetic energy and began to drift. I pulled out the oars we'd stashed away and slowly rowed the boat toward the buoy.

A light buoy, as the name would suggest, was used for demarcation at night. Its LED lights were powered by a combination of mini solar batteries and rechargeable, electric batteries. Light buoys could be used to guide ships and mark positions, coral reefs, and much more. Once placed, they served their purpose well.

There was no real reason anyone would want to go out of their way to touch one, occasional maintenance worker aside. I mean, nobody went around touching street signs. At least, that was my thought process until now.

"Let's see here... Aha!" I leaned over the boat and grasped a nylon cord so thin I'd have missed it if I hadn't known it was there. To make things even more complicated, the cord and the buoy had matching colors. "Nice and easy." I slapped on a pair of gardening gloves and began reeling in the cord—or rather, the item it was attached to.

Twenty meters of cord later, a blackish container emerged from the thick veil of darkness down below. The container was shoddily made and a bit bent out of shape from the water pressure. It hadn't really been waterproofed, but it was at least wrapped in multiple layers of transparent plastic bags.

"Need a hand?" Noticing that I was at the end of my rope, Otoha came shuffling over on her knees to help.

We hauled the container, which was about a meter long on all sides, onto the boat. "There we... go?!" Yep, we'd gotten an added bonus. The head popped up first, then the arms, torso, and legs. Between the pruned skin and horrible swelling, I could barely look at the hideously deformed corpse without retching.

It's no ordinary corpse, is it?

It latched on to the side of the boat, clumsily trying to haul itself up. Water spurted out of its swollen lips.

"Why you little...!" I couldn't kick the damn thing off because the container was restricting my movement. And to top it all off, it was tangled up in the same cord as the container, so waiting for it to fall back into the water was not an option.

The zombie leaned into me, foaming at the mouth. All its teeth were missing, but I knew it could easily tear flesh and shatter bone with nothing but the strength of its jaws.

I instinctively reached for my SAKURA. Snub-nosed revolvers weren't known for their accuracy, but that mattered little at point-blank range.

Suddenly, a blade whistled through the air, and Otoha's shovel sliced through the zombie's neck with the ease and precision of a well-tempered sword.

The head rolled down its back, falling into the water with a plop. Its whole body, especially the arms and legs, convulsed uncontrollably for a few seconds. After that, everything went silent.

"Man, I owe ya one, Oto—OOF!"

Otoha had fallen right on top of me. Although she'd managed to get in a beautiful swing, she had lost her footing immediately after. She wasn't used to fighting aboard an inflatable boat.

So soft... Wait, no, now's not the time!

Her breasts, soft and elastic unlike those of a corpse, pressed against my cheek.

I knew they were bigger than they looked, but with them right in front of my face, I really appreciated—

Dude. Not! The! Time!



"Hiroaki, I..."

"Easy now." I embraced Otoha in order to stop her from flailing about with the shovel in her hand. She got the message and simmered down. "You'll fall if you try standing up. Roll over, like so."

Once Otoha got off of me, I got up myself. Thankfully, we were careful enough not to send the container flying.

Otoha leaned over the edge of the boat and looked away, as though avoiding eye contact.

That must've been embarrassing, even for her.

She looked devastated, as though she had been violated a few moments ago. I felt a sharp pang of guilt even though I knew I technically hadn't done anything wrong.

"Sorry 'bout that," I said, scratching my cheek.

She didn't reply.

Considering that she'd gotten half-naked in front of me before without batting an eyelid, I didn't expect her to take it so hard.

Guess there's something uniquely hurtful about getting your breasts touched.

As I said earlier, Otoha was my partner and lifesaver. I couldn't stand seeing her like this, so I panicked and rattled off whatever nonsense came to mind in order to make her feel better.

"It wasn't that bad, was it? Well, I'd ask that if I happened to be an asshole. Erm, how do I put this? It was quite the treat! They, uh, they're a lot bigger than they look! Sorry, I didn't mean to say that. What I meant to say was—err, Otoha, are you even listening?"

Otoha said nothing.

I crawled over to her. "Hey, you okay?"

"I didn't get to examine it," Otoha lamented, staring longingly at the decapitated head as it sank deeper and deeper below.

"My condolences." I sighed and took out my knife, turning my attention to the container. I cut my way through the deceptively thick plastic bags and opened up the cube-shaped container. "Cha-ching!" The container was brimming with weapons and ammo—specifically, a few revolvers and semi-automatic pistols alongside a boatload of their respective ammo boxes.

"Wolf and Blazer... Better than nothing, I guess."

Both were ammunition manufacturers of less-than-stellar quality.

Wolf was a Russian manufacturer, if memory served. There were over ten ammo boxes, none of which were Winchester or other similarly esteemed brands. In any case, my top priority was finding ammo we could use for the guns we had on hand.

Managed to score three .38 boxes, fifty rounds each.

My SAKURA's gonna freak out when she sees this.

As far as revolvers went, the ones inside were similar in make to the SAKURA, the Chief's Special, the Detective Special, and comparable

mainstays. That was where the similarities ended, though; they lacked serial numbers, and their makes and models didn't ring any bells. Nothing but Saturday night specials, or "junk guns" for short.

The semi-automatic pistols, on the other hand, were all Russian Makarovs.

"That reminds me, didn't a bunch of these come from the Russian mafia when Russia adopted a different standard sidearm?"

The Russian military had officially adopted the MP-443 Grach as their standard-issue sidearm a good while back. The Makarov's legacy hadn't ended, however. It was still very much alive and well all over the world, including Japan. This was because of Makarovs that were stolen from military warehouses and sold on the black market as well as the fact that it'd been mass-produced ever since the Soviet days.

A few years ago, the Makarov had taken the title of the most confiscated illegal firearm, edging out the TT-33, and it'd been going strong ever since.

"Even the yakuza's arsenal isn't free from global trends," I said with a wry smile.

You guessed it: this container had been smuggled in by the yakuza.

This was how the yakuza smuggled their guns, according to a gun shop employee I'd known back in the day and a VRFPS buddy who'd claimed to be affiliated with the Japan Coast Guard.

Another person I'd gotten cozy with just recently had confirmed that the local yakuza had used this particular buoy to smuggle in weapons. After I'd heard that, I just had to check.

As for how they'd managed it, well, there wasn't much to it, actually. A foreign ship on its way to the harbor would stop just before entering, someone on board would "accidentally" drop a container into the water, and then they'd hook up a cord to the buoy. The yakuza members who were supposed to have retrieved the package had likely turned zombie by now, meaning it was ours for the taking.

Actually, come to think of it, the tangled-up corpse from earlier might've been its "rightful" owner.

"Are those grenades?!" Five round objects rested at the very bottom of the container. They closely resembled Russian RGD-5s but were likely replicas, judging from the complete lack of markings.

The idea of holding onto replica grenades was admittedly a little scary, but on the other hand, they packed enough of a punch to single-handedly turn a losing battle in our favor.

I decided to humbly take them as well.

Testing one out would probably be a good idea, just to see if they're safe.

"We're heading back," I told Otoha, who was still mourning her loss. I then fired up the engine and got ready to go.



Walkers, the living dead, the risen, zees, zombies... reanimated human cadavers had many names.

According to our self-proclaimed zombie expert, Otoha Judou, their creation was associated with Haitian folklore and specifically attributed to people called bokors. Bokors would revive corpses using necromancy and use them as personal slaves on their farms and the like.

Naturally, this was all superstition. None of it was real.

A corpse couldn't move even if it wanted to. The very notion of a multicellular organism as advanced as a human moving—let alone walking on two feet—while deceased was utterly absurd.

Bipedal movement was an incredibly intricate process that necessitated a functioning balance system regulated by the inner ear. For the inner ear to do anything, a working brain had to process the signals. In addition, there was simply no way an organism without a functioning circulatory system could be in control of its nervous system.

A monster created for one of those “transported to another world” novels? Sure. A real-life human being that had been studied as thoroughly as possible? Not so much.

The virus or parasite theory was also moot. Even something as basic as voluntary muscle movement required a functioning circulatory system. Applying an electric current to a dissected frog would make its tiny legs twitch for a little while, but eventually its cells would run out of nutrients and stop.

None of it made a lick of sense, and most people had rightfully treated zombies as a myth, a fantasy.

With time, zombies had become known as *the* go-to monster for low-budget horror movies and were loved by many. Just a dash of makeup and you were good to go. When George A. Romero's timeless masterpiece—according to Otoha—*Night of the Living Dead* came out, it ushered in a new age of vampire-esque zombies. In other words, it popularized the idea that if you were bitten by a zombie, you'd turn into a zombie.

Night of the Living Dead had been recognized as artful enough to be placed in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art. It was also selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Film Registry.

Toward the end of the 20th century came *Resident Evil*, *28 Days Later*, and *World War Z*, which had all attempted to imbue the zombie genre with a heaping dose of science.

Scientific terms like “virus” and “radiation” were used to explain the walking, flesh-eating corpse phenomenon.

To me, it just sounds like they gave the occult a fresh coat of paint. I mean, really, is there a meaningful difference between evil spirits and a virus, or demons and a parasite? In my opinion, they're all equally insufficient when it comes to actually explaining the whole damn thing.

Regardless of how zombies had come to be, our *real* world had fallen apart, and now these creatures roamed the crumbled ruins. Whether or not it made sense, they were a genuine threat. Unless you really, really wanted

to join their ranks for some reason, you had to fight back, and for that you needed a plan.

In other words, finding out what made them tick—if such a concept even applied—was essential to our survival.

A good starting point was asking questions. Were they nocturnal or diurnal? What did they use to navigate their environment? Their ears, their eyes, maybe something else entirely? How could they tell a corpse and a living being apart? That kind of stuff.

This was precisely why we made sure to examine their behaviors whenever possible. Although they had individual differences, establishing a pattern of behavior would make dealing with them a heck of a lot easier.



After driving for about half a day, we stopped by a local shopping mall. The sun was just peeking over the horizon.

I hesitantly slipped out of the car.

For a civilian vehicle, the G-Class Benz was a true fortress on wheels. As long as you were inside, you were pretty much safe. If you got out of it, though, not so much; zombies could be lurking around any corner, after all.

“Hmm...” Squinting, I scanned the area.

Just your average, run-of-the-mill suburban shopping mall and its excessively spacious parking lot peppered with cars. Not a single living—or undead—thing in sight. Emphasis on “in sight,” though.

After a period of prolonged activity, zombies would enter a dormant state, whether to unwind or delay the decay. At least, that’d been my experience. There could be one anywhere, lying in wait for unsuspecting victims like a ticking time bomb ready to go off.

“Let’s see here.” I inspected the area again, this time using the Lightweight Stalker. Slowly, thoroughly.

I couldn’t possibly inspect every nook and cranny, but I didn’t need to. Searching for telltale signs, like limbs sticking out or pools of pus on the ground, would suffice.

“Find anything?” Otoha asked me.

“Nope.”

“Bummer.”

“Can you not?” I was tired of beating the dead horse of our usual banter. As Otoha hopped out of the car, I took a few steps forward and surveyed our surroundings a third time.

The busted entrance and windows were scorched in places. The fire must’ve taken place during the initial stages of the apocalypse, back when the sprinkler systems had still been fully functional. It looked like they’d kicked in and prevented the fire from spreading.

“Would you like me to go check?” piped up the maid sitting in the driver’s seat.

Yep, you heard me: the maid, stereotypical uniform and all. The fingerless, faux leather gloves she was wearing—presumably for driving—kind of clashed with the aesthetic, though.

Tetsuko Uemura was an invaluable asset to the team. We had picked her up the other day along with some additional goodies, like the G-Class Benz and the Lightweight Stalker.

She was no ordinary maid, oh no. Tetsuko had undergone specialized military training conducted by a foreign officer in order to adequately protect her charge. The VIP in question was none other than the Kosahana family's only daughter. Needless to say, the girl couldn't have been in more capable hands.

Remember the "person I'd gotten cozy with" I mentioned earlier? Yup, that person was Tetsuko.

Out of curiosity, I had once tried squeezing an age out of her. She had *politely* declined to answer, shooting daggers straight through me with her glare.

"No need. I'll handle it. Keep the engine running in case things go south." I lowered the rifle and looked around one last time. The scope's powerful zoom was great for sniping, but it also gave the user tunnel vision.

Seems clear enough to me.

"Showtime." Leaning forward, I made a break for the front entrance. Then, I rested my back against a partly charred yet perfectly stable pillar by the entrance and breathed a sigh of relief. There were no zombies in sight. "Looks clear," I said, looking around the mall, gun pointed forward.

Although there was light flooding in from the outside, the interior was mostly dark.

I grabbed the flashlight Tetsuko had given me with my left hand in an icepick grip and placed the tip of the Lightweight Stalker over it. This was a classic technique used by the police. The army just used night-vision goggles, but unfortunately for me, I didn't have a pair conveniently lying around.

It was quiet. So quiet, in fact, that if you listened very carefully, you could only hear—

"Yoo-hoo."

"Wagh?!" I snapped my head back to see Otoha, clutching her trusty shovel, and a brunette beauty standing right beside her. They had almost scared the bejesus out of me just now.

The girl at Otoha's side had refined facial features, equally elegant mannerisms, and a fine head of chestnut-brown hair. The color was consistent and looked perfectly natural.

Her mere presence gave the room an air of class that was hampered only by the less-than-ladylike Remington 700 in her hands. She was none other than Shino Kosahana in the flesh.

This classy lady had been born to loving parents: an Italian mother and a Japanese business-mogul father. She was also the sniper who had taken *Field Battle* by storm.

"Thought you were gonna sit this one out?"

"I had an unexpected change of heart, p-partner," Shino said with a sheepish smile.

Even if she didn't lift a finger, she'd be intoxicatingly attractive, but those added little quirks and gestures put her into her own category. I mean, she can't even say "partner" without getting all shy since she's thinking of the other meaning of the word. There's no topping that.

"I'm his partner," Otoha growled, tapping her shoulder with the shovel grip. "Me."

Is it just me or is she giving me a death stare? Must be my imagination, uh-huh.

"He's lost without me," she added.

"Sure am," I said with a wry smile.

Here I thought all that time I spent under Otoha's wing helped bolster her image of me, but apparently not. It is what it is, I guess.

In the end, we decided to explore together. Having not one but *two* partners by my side felt reassuring... and a little pathetic at the same time, seeing as I was supposed to be the man of the group.

Not that I'm complaining. Those two can handle themselves in a fight.

"Awfully quiet, isn't it?" Shino murmured.

Otoha and I had scavenged derelict stores like there was no tomorrow, but this was all clearly new to Shino. Of course she'd find it a tad off-putting that a place normally brimming with life had none left.

Stopping, Otoha pointed at the floor. "Those were not made by zombies." Fresh bike tracks.

Biker zombies? Yeah, right. If only.

"Then who, pray tell?"

"Looters, the desperate kind. It's a staple," Otoha answered matter-of-factly.

Shino winced ever so slightly.

She, just like yours truly, hadn't experienced human nature at its absolute worst during the initial stages of the zombie apocalypse. Both of us were shut-ins, after all. If anything, Shino had gotten to experience the exact opposite: human nature at its finest. Self-sacrifice, unconditional fatherly love, and all that jazz.

Otoha, on the other hand, hadn't been nearly as fortunate.

She had known what to expect going into it, but even so, witnessing the lowest of the low firsthand must've been a nightmare. No girl in her late teens should've had to see adults killing and maiming one another over the tiniest crumbs of bread.

"Otoha, I..."

"Hmm?" There wasn't a dent in her deadpan expression.

"Forget it. So, what happens to the ones who don't come out on top?"

"They turn zombie. Everyone does."

"Ain't that a kick in the head," I said sarcastically.

"If so, wouldn't they have come out by now?" Shino pointed out.

We had been wandering the premises for some time, yet we hadn't had a single encounter thus far. Even the aforementioned dormant zombies should've been roused by our scents or our chitchat by now.

"Zombies tend to mimic past behavioral patterns, right, Hiroaki?" Otoha said as though she'd just remembered.

"Right."

Be it my parents, store employees, or what have you, the overwhelming majority of zombies we'd stumbled across on our journeys had tried going through the same old motions of their pasts.

There's a hypothesis called body memory, which suggests that memory can be stored in the body as well as the brain. For example, there are records of organ recipients exhibiting intense cravings for the donors' preferred foods. The brain is a bundle of neurons, but neurons aren't exclusive to the brain; therefore, there's a slight possibility that the body itself is capable of storing memories. It's kind of like muscle memory, which is learning through doing. Repeat an action enough times and the body'll remember, even if the brain has ceased functioning.

"Who do you associate with shopping malls?" Otoha lifted a finger. "That's right—customers and employees. And what time is it? Well before opening hours. Case closed."

"Uh, sure."

Okay, it's seven in the morning and the stores aren't open, but how is that sufficient evidence?!

"It all adds up now." Shino nodded in agreement.

Not you, too...

"No, it doesn't! And you, Otoha, wipe that smug grin off your face right this instant!" Otoha was rocking her usual expression, but now that I'd known her for over a month I could tell she was feeling proud of herself. The slightly elevated corners of her lips, the subtle narrowing of her eyes... that kinda stuff.

"Posit the superior theory, then, Dr. Hiroaki."

"First of all, it's just Hiroaki. Secondly, I, erm..."

I don't have one, but I can't back out now! I racked my brains for the perfect retort.

At that moment, a groan came from down the hall.

"Check and mate," I declared.

"Unpaid overtime from beyond the grave. Didn't see that one coming."

"Even the dead cannot help but bend a knee to the cosmic horrors of unpaid overtime."

"Sure enough."

I nodded in Shino's direction, gave her the signal, and got into formation.

Leading the charge was our shovel-wielding, front-line general, a.k.a. Otoha. I was about ten steps behind her, and bringing up the rear was Shino.

"Judging from the sound, there's just one." Crouching low to the ground, Otoha crept forward.

I knew better than anyone that Otoha was more than capable of handling herself in a fight, but even so my hands were clammy with sweat.

I swallowed hard, then warned, "Don't get too cocky. It might be a trap."

Zombies setting traps? Unlikely. Other living, breathing human beings who had once tried holing up in here? Very possible.

Otoha waved us over upon reaching the end of the hall. "Come." She was standing tall with her shovel lowered, completely at ease.

"Odd..." Shino and I exchanged glances and walked over to her.

"What's going on h—oh."

"Eek!"

"Eek indeed."

We'd turned the corner only to find a legless female zombie lying on the floor. A fledgling, from the looks of it. It had clean skin and wore a crooked pair of silver-rimmed glasses.

Must've been one hell of an accident.

Aside from the pool of blood and protruding intestines, the zombie could've easily passed for a human being.

"Hmm?" Something was off about this one. It was clutching numerous bags of sweets, some of which had spilled onto the ground.

As if that wasn't enough, its jacket pockets were also stuffed full of sugary treats, looking like they were about to burst at any given second.

Did she plan on eating all these? No, that'd be insane.

"I-It's moving," Shino muttered, voice quaking with fear.

"If it's got a head, it moves," Otoha replied, poking the corpse with her shovel. "Simple as that."

The fact that it lacked legs meant it wouldn't get up and move around, and the arms were... preoccupied, so to speak. In terms of threat level it was close to, if not entirely, harmless.

"It really likes its sweets, doesn't it?" Shino mused. "Imported sweets, that is."

Now that you mention it, all the packaging is in English. Lots of chocolate stuff here, too.

She looked over at me. "Think she might've been that one girl who gave every guy some generic, store-bought chocolate on Valentine's Day?"

"Of course... not!"

Shino was the closest thing to a "perfect" lady, inside and out, I knew, but even she had her moments of weirdness.

Still, even those moments are cute in their own way.

She tilted her head, then bent down to pick up a fallen bag of sweets.
“What else would she do with all thi—”

“GraAargh!”

“Eek?!”

Teeth bared, the zombie cried out in rage.

Not expecting it to get this angry—yes, *angry*—we failed to react in time. Admittedly, this had been partially caused by our own hubris.

The zombie sprang up in the air, swiping out to grab Shino’s ankle as it fell back down.

“Lady Shino!”

A shrill voice rang in our ears, followed by a thundering shotgun blast. The zombie’s head flew right off, bursting into a million pieces like a ruptured water balloon. Blood, gray matter, and loose chunks of cranium scattered all over the floor.

Now missing everything above its bottom lip, the zombie collapsed.

After that, the remains of the silver-rimmed glasses fell to the ground with a *clink*.

“Are you okay?!” Clutching the Mossberg 500, Tetsuko ran over to her mistress’ side.

Are those... two shotgun shells between her fingers?! Combat load hype!

Combat loading was a highly specialized technique performed primarily by trained soldiers on military shotguns. It involved loading a shell directly into the chamber, firing, and reloading again in quick succession, completely doing away with the need for a magazine. Shotgun ammo came in all shapes and sizes, but with combat loading, you’d get to freely switch between whichever one was needed.

Tetsuko had opted for either a slug or sabot round—single projectile rounds designed for hunting large game—instead of standard buckshot. Considering the zombie had been directly behind Shino, buckshot had been out of the question, as it would’ve hit her as well.

Otoha looked at the maid. “Uemura, why—”

“You were taking a little too long for comfort, so I came out to check on you. My sincerest apologies.” Sensing that the danger had passed, Tetsuko lowered the shotgun.

I glanced over at the unmoving, effectively headless corpse.

In terms of caliber, shotguns were king, easily beating out the competition. While their effective range was rather small, their stopping power was off the charts.

After all, Tetsuko’s blast had torn the zombie’s head clean off, sparing Shino’s clothes from the subsequent spray of blood and gray matter.

“Checkup time.” Otoha crouched down and reached for Shino’s clothes.

“Erm, Otoha, what are you doing?”

“Off. Now,” Otoha ordered, looking Shino in the eye. “If there’s a scratch or a bite mark, you could turn zombie.”

“Otoha, relax!”

“We’ve got to act fast. I’ll start by cutting off your limbs. That should do the trick.” Otoha raised her shovel overhead. “Quickly, before the virus spreads. *World War Z* style.”



"Nooo!"

Hearing Tetsuko ready her shotgun behind me, I quickly shouted, "She's clean! Clean as a whistle! Not a hair on her head was sullied, I promise you!"

"Is that so?" Otoha tilted her head sideways, lowering the shovel.

"Yes. A-At least, I think so," Shino said.

"Okay. Cool."

"Really? That's all?" I heaved a huge sigh.

Otoha's unparalleled, quick decision-making skills were reassuring and sometimes utterly terrifying. Her calls tended to be right on the money—when it came to zombie-related matters, anyway—but everyone else wasn't always on board. Especially not in the heat of the moment.

Had Otoha actually gone through and chopped off one of Shino's limbs, she would've had a head full of lead not a second later, whether she'd been right or not.

My blood pressure's through the roof right now.

I turned to the maid. "Uemura, I'm so, *so* sorry for what just happened. Take Kosahana back to the car. We'll catch up."

"If you insist." Tetsuko nodded and went back down the hall with Shino.

"Listen," I said to Otoha. "Would it hurt for you to, I dunno, think before you act?"

"Immediate threats call for immediate action."

"I get that, I do, but you *did* just try ripping an innocent girl's clothes off right in front of me."

She gave me a look. "And...?"

I can almost see the question marks flying out of her head.

"It's, you know, it's embarrassing. For both parties."

If Otoha had bothered to explain her reasoning beforehand and gotten Shino's consent, things would've gone down much differently. Otoha's actions made sense; assuming Shino had, in fact, been scratched, immediate action would've been very much necessary. Ripping off her clothes without her explicit consent, though, had been a step too far.

"We've done it countless times. Was it embarrassing for you?"

"Umm, yeah. Very, I might add."

We checked each other's bodies every single day without fail, but we did it my way. Having learned from my mistakes, I always made sure to get inspected first. That way, my little Johnny wouldn't get riled up, and even if it did, I'd already have my pants back on by then.

Otoha never seemed to mind being seen half naked one bit, but she *did* find my little man a tad too intimidating, so the arrangement benefited both of us.

"You always look fine to me."

"*Look*, Otoha, *look*. I'm a teenager surging with hormones, for crying out loud."

"But—"

"Still, I push through. I'll never have a repeat of that dreaded incident on day one. Never again, you hear?"

Otoha blinked once, twice, then said, "That's nice."

"What is?"

"Well, you know..." She struggled to give me a straight answer.

Her cheeks are turning a little pink, aren't they? Could she be thinking about the day one incident? Anything but that, please. Just put me out of my misery.

"So, uh, zombies tend to mimic their old behavioral patterns, right?"

"Tend to. Exceptions exist."

The overwhelming majority of zombies fell into this category. According to Otoha, that was the case in many zombie movies, too.

"Then tell me." I crouched beside the corpse and picked up a bag. "What was it planning to do with all this sugar?"



The shopping mall trip turned out to be a bust. There was nothing of value left.

Food? Well, let's just say that even the vending machines had been stripped clean. The chocolate had nice packaging and all, but the mere possibility of it crawling with germs was enough to kill our appetites, so we left it all behind.

Our spoils consisted of a few articles of clothing—mostly underwear—some shoes we came upon in the backyard, and an assortment of cheap variety-store goodies.

We put them in the car and went back on the road, heading for the suburbs. The city was far too dangerous, in more ways than one.

"There we... go."

I was disassembling one of the guns from the container we'd pulled up yesterday. Revolvers were famous for pretty much never jamming, so I didn't even bother to check those, but pistols were a whole other story.

I laid the Makarov's parts out on a plastic tray I'd gotten from the variety store earlier.

"Looks okay to me, though I'll have to give it a test run later. Just in case."

"Good idea," said Tetsuko, currently manning the wheel.

"Then again, it's the Makarov, so you should be fine."

"Amen."

Incidentally, Otoha and Shino were in the back seat.

Otoha just sat there, expressionless as ever. Shino, on the other hand, was nestled up against Otoha's shoulder, dozing off.

You'd think she'd be a little more cautious around Otoha after what happened, but after we gave her Otoha's side of the story, Shino let her off the hook right away. She's a good kid through and through.

Otoha was quite a softy herself. Whenever Shino's head was about to slip off, she'd carefully nudge it back, as she was doing right now.

"What?" Otoha blurted, noticing my eyes on her in the rearview mirror.

"Oh, nothing."

"Uh-huh."

"It's early, but Kosahana's asleep, so what say we find a nice place and take a little breather?"

Tetsuko nodded in agreement. "I think that's an excellent idea."

"Uemura needs rest, too; she's been at the wheel since the morning hours. Where to, Otoha?"

"Sec." Otoha rummaged through the backpack she had placed over her knees before pulling out a road map. "Found it. A little to the west and—oh, there it is."

At that moment, a decently large river came into view.

That's what she was looking for...?

"What are gonna do with a river?"

"Not there, *there*." Otoha pointed at a small landmass in the middle of the river.

"You mean the sandbank?"

"Yup. The view's great, plus the current and the sediment would make crossing the river immensely difficult for zombies. And they'd be easy to spot."

"Makes sense."

I'd imagine the river sounds and the freshwater smell would have the added benefit of masking our presence.

"Think we can get there, Uemura?"

"Easily," Tetsuko said, heading down the riverbank.

The car rocked from side to side as it made its way over the riverbank's diverse array of rocks, tearing Shino from her restful slumber.

"Apologies, Lady Shino."

"I was out, wasn't I?" Shino said, a hint of embarrassment in her voice.

"The wheels might get stuck in the mud, so I'll be shifting into high gear. Hold on tight." The G-Wagen crashed into the river, its bulky tires spraying water everywhere.

We reached the sandbank in seconds, then Tetsuko killed the engine.

"The soreness will never not be unpleasant." I got out of the car, followed by Tetsuko, Otoha, and last but not least, Shino.

The sandbank was much larger than it had initially seemed, about a hundred meters wide in all directions. Tufts of grass dappling the surface swayed gently in the wind.

You could fit a modest house here.

I circled the perimeter just in case there were any zombies hiding in the water, but thankfully, I came up dry. The likelihood of a zombie successfully crossing the river was rather slim, just like Otoha had said, but one could've still feasibly washed ashore. Still, it turned out to be a needless worry.

The sandbank is zombie-free.

I breathed a sigh of relief and prepared to sit down.

"Hiroaki," Otoha called out to me, "Uemura said she'd teach us martial arts."

"What?"

A little abrupt, no? Also, did Tetsuko actually volunteer to do this?

"I asked her nicely," Otoha added, as if she'd read my thoughts.

"Care to join us?" Tetsuko asked, popping out from behind her.

"You should really get some rest, Uemura." Seriously, she'd done all of the driving thus far. "And you, Otoha, be a little more understanding, puh-lease."

"I appreciate the concern, but I'm more than happy to oblige. We need to think long term, after all." Tetsuko didn't look the least bit bothered. In fact, she even kept up a cordial smile.

How is she not feeling even a little bit tired? She looks like your average young woman, yet she's got more stamina than the only guy in the group.

"Quote. 'Without the gun, I'm easy pickings.' End quote," Otoha said as she drew closer.

"Well, yes, but—"

"It's a valuable opportunity."

"Not sure if a single session'll do much, but you know what? Fine. I'll give it a shot."

Otoha was right. This was a valuable opportunity.

Needless to say, VRFPS games had done little to improve my martial arts prowess. I had good reflexes and a decent build, but that alone could only take me so far.

"Again, sorry for disrupting you, Uemura."

"Please, it's fine," she said amicably. "We'll focus on self-defense techniques, no fitness training. Hiroaki, would you be so kind as to walk over to me?"

At her request, I casually walked toward Tetsuko. "Sure, then wha—"

The moment I got within arm's reach of her, she snatched me by my collar and threw me to the ground. Thankfully, the soft grass cushioned my fall. She had also pulled back at the very last second.

"Thoughts?"

"Never knew I could fly."

"Judo and aikido are all about redirecting the opponent's momentum. There's more to it than sheer strength. Also, striking arts like karate and boxing aren't very effective against walkers, so we can cross those off the list." Her explanation was as eloquent as ever.

Strikes and blows wouldn't do much good against an adversary that could shrug off broken bones and torn limbs like it was nothing.

Throwing techniques by themselves would have a hard time incapacitating a zombie, but they could set you up for a number of effective

responses—stomping its face in, destroying its spinal cord, or even giving yourself enough time to escape.

“Your thoughts, Otoha?” Tetsuko asked, turning to face her.

“I like your movements,” said definite martial arts expert, Otoha Judou. “But we’ll need something more against zombies.”

“Such as...?”

“Allow me to demonstrate.” Otoha turned and started coming right at me.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

“A zombie’s deadliest weapon is its teeth.” Without warning, Otoha shoved her fist into my mouth. “Or rather, its jaw. Scratches are deadly in their own right, but nothing a thick set of clothes can’t handle. The jaw, not so much, so we put it out of commission.”

“Hrmngh! Mmfff!”

Tetsuko watched attentively, then replied, “That sounds like an excellent idea, but what about the risk factor associated with sticking your hand inside a zombie’s mouth?”

“Ideally, you’d want to use an object—preferably a rolled-up magazine, but anything’ll do—while wearing appropriately thick gloves to mitigate the risk. If executed correctly, the zombie’s teeth go bye-bye.”

“Mrngh... Nmff!”

“A rolled-up magazine, that’s genius! Easy to find and easy to dispose of.”

“Disposing of the tool lessens the risk of infection, too.”

I finally reached up and pulled her hand out of my mouth. “When will you learn that your actions have consequences?!”



We’d had a little bit of a rocky start, but it was smooth sailing from there on out. With Tetsuko as the instructor and Otoha as a “supervisor,” we did a little zombie self-defense training. After that, we transitioned into learning various ways to use ropes for our survival. Soon enough, two hours had passed.

Also, we now had a rope stretching from across the river. Each end was tied to a crowbar buried deep in the ground. I’d fallen over many times trying to get the crowbars planted on each side of the water. The rope would make it easier and faster to get from one riverbank to the other, so long as you held on to it.

This whole process had been the workout of a lifetime, despite Tetsuko’s promise of no fitness training.

“I’m beat... No fitness training, my ass!”

“That should about do it for today. Fine work, Hiroaki.” Tetsuko had helped with the process, yet not a single bead of sweat graced her brow.

How is a mere gamer supposed to compete with this?

“You’ve got potential. I’m sure you’ll surpass me in no time.”

“Um, thanks.” It felt good hearing that, even if she didn’t really mean it.

"We'll explore the area," declared Otoha, holding on to the rope. She pointed at me. "You make lunch."

"Can a man not get some rest around here?!"

Then again, I haven't had a bite to eat since this morning, and that little workout certainly didn't help.

"Okay, you know what? Fine. Safe travels." Otoha nodded and began making her way to the other side of the river, with Tetsuko following closely behind.

Once they had just about finished crossing, I sighed and headed to the trunk of the car. Why? To procure the ingredients and the cookware, of course. At least, that was my plan.

"Hello, Hiroaki."

"Oh, hi, Kosahana."

I looked down and saw Shino tending to a pot on the portable gas stove.

"So, erm, Otoha asked me to make lunch, but I guess that's taken care of."

"You bet," Shino said with a smile. "The rice is almost done."

"How thoughtful of you."

"We're partners, remember? Partners help each other out. Besides, you must be tired. Please, rest."

She's too pure for this world. We're not worthy.

"You know, Otoha's pretty damn bossy."

"Perhaps." She flashed me a playful grin.

Each and every one of her smiles was memorable, especially considering Otoha was lacking in that department.

"'I'm the supervisor,' she says, and then all she does is complain. Like, she could be doing something useful in the meantime, you know? Ever since I've known her, she's had this weird tendency to treat others as pack mules."

"You sound close," Shino commented out of the blue.

"Do we?"

True, it's not like we're at each other's throats all the time. We have a mutual respect thing going on. But would I call us close? Eh, I guess it depends on what you mean by close. It's not really something I can answer on the spot; I'd be skipping over all the nuances. Personally, I'm inclined to say I'm her lackey more than anything else.

"Have you known each other for long?"

"What? No, of course not!" I frantically shook my head, for whatever reason. "I've known you for way longer."

"That's odd. You seem to get along awfully well despite that."

"Well..." Technically, even though we had only gotten to know each other fairly recently, I had spent a lot more time in Otoha's company than I had in Shino's.

Actually, Otoha was the first girl I had ever spent any considerable amount of time with, as much as it pained me to say.

"She's... different. I don't feel awkward around her."

It had been smooth sailing ever since the awkward day one incident. All Otoha cared about was zombies. She was completely indifferent to everything else, which made it easy for me.

"Do you get nervous around girls?" Shino asked, tilting her head to one side.

"You know how it is with us, err, indoorsy types," I replied, choosing my words carefully. Wouldn't want to insult her.

"Do you get nervous around me, too?" Shino brought herself closer to me.

"I, erm..."

A little too close for comfort there, Shino.

"What's so special about her?"

"Well, Kosahana, you know... It's like... uh..." I couldn't give a straight answer to save my life.

What do I do?

"Hiroaki, listen to me," she said, staring into my eyes.

"Um, yes?"

"It's *Shino*. S-h-i-n-o. We've talked about this."

It was so abrupt that I had trouble processing it at first, but then it all came together.

Oh, that's what she's so hung up on. I never really thought about it before. Otoha and I just kind of started out on a first-name basis, and it stuck. To everyone else, our relationship might seem more intimate because of that.

"Let's hear it."

"B-But—"

"We've known each other for so long now."

"Yeah, but, like..."

I'm a nobody, and you're the modern-day equivalent of a princess! It's hard!

"Double standards," she huffed. "I'm calling it."

I groaned. "Come on."

"Need a reminder? How about our *Field Battle* days?"

"Yeah, but, like, I owe you my life and stuff. It's a respect thing."

"Don't you owe *Otoha* your life, too?"

"That I do, yes."

"See what I mean?"

Okay, yeah, I get it.

"Say it. Or else." She brought herself even closer.

Oh no, her fragrant aroma is assaulting my nostrils!

"Okay, okay. Have it your way... Shino."

"What was that?"

"Um, Shiii..."

"No!"

"Shino! Shino!"

Why did you say it twice, dude? Oh, whatever. I'll swallow my pride if this will make her happy. I'm sure I'll get used to it eventually, but I'm more afraid of how Tetsuko will react.

"Good. Keep up the good work, Hiroaki," Shino said, her smile radiant as always.

"Will do, Kosa—"

"Hmm?"

"Shino, I meant Shino."

"Good." Shino nodded curtly.

Shortly after the rice finished cooking, we got to work making our unique spin on pot-au-feu with leftover ingredients from Shino's place. We threw in some carrots, potatoes, and bacon. We then sprinkled in some seasoning and let it simmer. The smell was fantastic.

"This reminds me of all the times I went camping with Dad and Tetsuko." Her tone was nostalgic, her eyes warm.

"I see."

Is she still in mourning?

"It's okay, I'm over it now. Thanks to you, Hiroaki," Shino added quickly, reading me like a book. "A little pushy, I'll admit, but it did the trick. You have my eternal gratitude."

"Um, yeah. No prob."

Thinking back on it, there might've been a better way, but all's well that ends well, as they say.

After that, we just watched the pot cook in silence for a little while.

"Now for the garnishes." Suddenly, she froze. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I heard it too."

We exchanged glances and tried making out the sound. It was something metallic rolling across the ground in the distance. It drew closer and closer and then... *splash!*

Is something trying to cross the river?

"Let's go," I whispered.

"Okay."

The tall clumps of grass made it impossible to identify the source of the sound from our seated positions. We got on our knees, picked our guns off the ground, and waited.

The metallic sound came back, this time louder than before.

Shouldering the Lightweight Stalker, I placed my fingers over the bolt. I glanced over to my side and saw that Shino had done the same.

Fearing an accidental discharge, neither of us had loaded a round into the chamber. Not that it was necessary; we could load in quite literally an instant.

We waited until the very last second, just to make sure the zombie wouldn't know we were there until it was too late.

Just then, the grass in front of us parted, revealing... a barrel.

"What the...?"

"Huh?"

"Is that a barrel?" I asked.

As if that wasn't strange enough, Otoha's head popped out from one end of it.

"Hey there. Miss me?"

"What is *this*?"

"It's a barrel."

"No kidding." Before I could ask "why," Otoha crawled out from it and stood up. "What happened? You're soaking wet!"

Naturally, crossing a river would get you wet. But Otoha wasn't just a little wet; she was soaked from head to toe. Her virtually transparent clothes stuck snugly to her skin, leaving little to the imagination.

"I fell in," she said matter-of-factly.

"And the barrel?"

"I found it."

"It won't even fit in the car. It's too big. What do you plan on using it for?!"

"I won't be taking it anywhere. It's single-use." Otoha stood it upright, then said, "Yo, Shino."

"Yes?"

Otoha walked over to Shino, water audibly sloshing around in her shoes, and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Take off your clothes."

"What?!"



"What did I do to deserve this?" I muttered, throwing handfuls of grass onto the fire.

The grass from the sandbank was full of moisture, so burning it produced a ton of thick smoke and made my eyes water.

Whatever you do, don't look up, I reminded myself.

I had no choice in the matter. Otoha and Shino were bathing in their makeshift barrel tub, which was mounted over a U-shaped concrete gutter—another one of Otoha's strange finds. Both of them were stark naked.

Shino awkwardly cleared her throat. "Hey, um, Otoha..."

"Yeah?"

"Th-The water's just delightful, isn't it?"

"Sure is. Hear that, firekeeper?"

"Uh, yep! Don't mention it!" I shouted a little too loudly.

Never thought I'd help someone set up a barrel tub, but there's a first time for everything, I guess. To be fair, the water here's clean and plentiful, so might as well put it to good use. Hygiene aside, regular bathing also helps mask our scents.

"You could've gone in by yourself, you know? Why drag me into this?"

"I'm doing you a favor, Miss 'Nooo, I can't go in alone! That'd be the end of me!'"

"I-In my defense, Hiroaki is a... a..." Shino's stammering easily reached my ears despite the thick veil of smoke between us.

By the way, I had been *politely advised* to look away as they were undressing.

"A perv? What else is new?"

"I'm still here, you know!"

"Do you deny screaming 'Feast your eyes on this!' at the top of your lungs as you unveiled your monstrous bulge with an equally monstrous grin on your face?"

"You had me backed into a corner, and it was a one-off thing!" My eyes came dangerously close to flickering upward, but I quickly covered them, safely avoiding a catastrophe.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Why you gotta do me like this, Shino?

"Exactly what you think it means. We've explored each other's naked bodies many times over, leaving no speck of skin unturned."

"Again with this crap?!"

"I didn't know what I was getting myself into. Hiroaki, he... he... I'm sorry," Otoha said, her voice quivering as though she was about to burst into tears.

"There, there. You're safe now. Now tell me, what did he—"

"I literally just checked her for bite marks! I'm innocent!" I yelled before Otoha could besmirch my good name any further. "You're the one who brought it up in the first place! I didn't do anything weird, I promise!"

"Weird? What d'you mean?"

You're purposefully trying to get under my skin, aren't you, Otoha?

"Hiroaki's pervy proclivities aside, you did the right thing, Shino. You got to wash off the zombie gunk and your scent at the same time."

"Erm, yay me?"

"Oh, and one other thing." Otoha's tone became just a shade more sinister, though it was so subtle even I could scarcely tell the difference. "Your boobs look heavy. Let me give you a hand."

"Huh?! What are you—aah!"

"What's going on up there?!"

Let me in on the fun too! Wait, no, that's not what I mean!

"Two can play at that game!" It sounded like Shino was going on the offensive. "Take this, and that!"

"Shino, did you just...?"

"I-I didn't mean to!"

Didn't mean to what? Inquiring minds want to know!

A strong desire to sneak a quick peek welled up inside me, but in light of the shovel resting against the barrel, I immediately quashed it.

What could they be doing in there?

My imagination was running wild.

I can feel a nosebleed coming on, and the smoke's making my head spin. It'd be a shame if I were to pass out. A shame, indeed. I need to reign in my imagination. Now, how can I do that? I take a quick peek, of course. Sounds like a plan, and a brilliant one at that!

Conveniently, I had my trusty pocket mirror stashed away, the one I used for zombie-spotting.

Just one little glance, I promise. Please forgive me. Apologizing to no one in particular, I reached for the pocket mirror, only to have it caught midair.

"Where did you—?!"

It was none other than Tetsuko, who slowly shook her head without saying a word, as though admonishing a child.

I get it, I get it! Please just let go. It hurts! Like, a lot! What's up with that grip?!

"Hiroaki..." I instinctively looked up and saw Shino and Otoha looking at me with scorn, their heads poking out from the side of the barrel.



"Perv."

"Shame on you."

"I-I can explain!"

In what could only be described as an act of karmic irony, the pocket mirror slipped out of my hand, landing to the ground with a loud thud.

Begging it is.

"Have mercy!"

"All I have for you is death."

Otoha grabbed her shovel and began relentlessly dumping scoops of hot water on me.

"Hot, hot, hoooooot!"



Our bodies clean and our stomachs full, we spread out a map over the hood of the car and began mulling over our next destination.

I found this puzzling, seeing as our current location seemed to be just what we were looking for: a peaceful, suburban area. There were ranch-style homes and the occasional warehouse or facility, but that was about it.

We hadn't seen many zombies around here either, though we couldn't let our guard down in case those houses still had owners trudging around. You never knew when a dormant zombie might come out to play.

"Can't we just, you know, stay here?" I asked Otoha, looking over the sandbank.

I had a hard time imagining a place more ideal than this. An endless water supply, a road close by, enough fish to last us a lifetime... What more could you want?

"No."

"Why? Give me one good reason."

Otoha pointed to a large facility at the lower reaches of the river.

"There. Happy?"

"The nuclear power plant..."

"Ah, a meltdown is what you're worried about. I see." Tetsuko nodded approvingly. "They *were* restarting some of the reactors recently. I'm not sure if this one in particular was restarted, though."

Most of Japan's nuclear power plants had been closed for the last twenty years or so. To fill in the gap in her energy-consumption needs, Japan had turned to newly developed solar tech and the smart grid network, along with some old-fashioned thermal power plants.

Eventually, Japan had finally clawed her way out of an economic recession, but things hadn't stopped there. In hopes of ushering in a new golden age, Japan had then turned her attention to the electronics industry, supporting its growth through national policy four or five years ago. According to all known estimates, Japan's energy-consumption needs would only increase with time.

As a result, Japan had begun looking into ways she could get her nuclear plants up and running again a little while before any of us had been born. As one might expect, anti-nuclear sentiments had arisen and promptly died out before they could ever really go mainstream. Japan had had an economic recession to confront, after all.

"The workers have likely turned zombie by now."

The parts of a nuclear plant that weren't automated would usually be operated by workers, who had almost certainly been infected. Zombies had a tendency to mimic their old behaviors, meaning the plants were relatively harmless for the time being. That said, they were a disaster just waiting to happen if nothing was done about them.

"Everywhere within an eighty-kilometer radius of a power plant is a potential danger zone." Otoha ran her finger across the map, drawing a nice, round circle. "As you can see, we can't stick around for long."

Needless to say, our current location was within said eighty-kilometer radius.

"Doesn't appear as though we have a great deal of options, eh?" Tetsuko said, crossing her arms.

"A deserted island could work," Shino piped up.

Based on our experiences with the sandbank, a deserted island did sound rather enticing. However, it had one fatal flaw: accessibility. Something as simple as casually strolling over to the nearest shopping mall or hardware store for supplies would instead be a monumental undertaking.

I sighed. "We'll need a real boat, I'm guessing? Don't imagine our inflatable buddy or a shoddy raft will do the trick."

It'd be nice if there were a fully functional boat conveniently waiting for us somewhere, but that's probably not gonna happen.

We had once searched a harbor from end to end, and all of the vessels had either been too big for us to handle or in shambles, or both.

"Aren't swimmers going to be a threat?"

Not like we've ever encountered one before, but doesn't mean we won't.

"That they will, if they do exist."

Unlike fictional zombies, whose attributes adapted to a screenwriter's every whim, our zombies should've been fairly consistent. In theory, anyway. If there was a way for us to verify that they were, in fact, incapable of swimming, a deserted island would likely shoot up to the very top of our priority list.

"Hold up. If zombies can't swim, doesn't that mean there's a good chance that remote islands and the like weren't hit?"

"Now that you mention it..." Tetsuko nodded thoughtfully.

"The outbreak occurred at roughly the same time all around the globe," Otoha said. "America, Africa, China, Europe, Australia... Everyone, including our humble island nation of Japan, got hit. From multiple spots, too. Why? That I don't know, but what I do know is that any remote islands were likely impacted as well."

We all exchanged glances.

Actually, yeah. Otherwise, the fact that the whole world was overrun in a matter of days wouldn't make sense. But that leaves us with another question.

"If the zombie outbreak was, in fact, caused by bacteria or a virus or whatever, it couldn't possibly have sprung up everywhere in the exact same timeframe, right?"

That's not how infectious diseases work; they don't just crop up out of nowhere. Maybe it had a carrier capable of worldwide travel? But then again, man-made or not, am I seriously supposed to believe that there's this scary new disease that's so infectious it just so happens to have brought humanity to its knees? Wouldn't we have already caught it by now if that were the case? Not that I've really given it much thought.

What if it's not a disease? What if it's a bioweapon that got loose? Or maybe someone let it out?

Silence settled over the group for a little while.

"In any case, I'll take the deserted island idea into consideration," Otoha concluded, folding her arms over her chest.



By sundown, we had decided on staying the night here.

Tetsuko and Shino rested in the car while Otoha and I stood guard. The plan was to switch shifts in six hours, wait out the night, and get back on the road come sunrise.

"Not seeing much," I said, looking through the binoculars Tetsuko had given me.

Whenever I *did* come upon something suspicious, I'd immediately switch to the rifle, only to find out that I was either seeing things or that the zombie was very far away.

"Shame."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Don't let your guard down."

"I won't." As obsessive as she was, Otoha was pretty much the sole reason we had even made it this far. Her advice was to be taken seriously.

"So..." I said, looking through the binoculars once more.

"So?"

"I never really got around to saying it, but..."

"Uh-huh?"

"Well, it's not like I didn't want to, I just never got the chance."

"Never got the chance to say what?" Otoha was starting to get a little confused.

"To, umm, to say thank you."

"Huh?"

I couldn't say for sure, but I had a feeling that I'd put a tiny dent in her deadpan expression.

I, of course, had my back turned to her. Otherwise, I would've died of embarrassment the moment those words left my lips.

"If it wasn't for you, I never would've made it this far."

Yes, she had almost sent my head flying back in the police station. Yes, she had pulled the shovel on me multiple times during our checkups, but she had also saved my life again and again.

If she hadn't come to my rescue back when I was wrestling with zombie Shouji, I would've been toast, even if Shino *had* landed her shot on time. Imagine if Shino had put down her dad and then put me down, too... Actually, don't.

"You've got the smarts, you've got the, umm, decisiveness... Both equally important, of course. Because of all this, uhh, well, not *just* because of this; I mean, there's more to you than that, naturally. But, umm..."

Just gotta find the right words... Oh, I know. Otoha, there's probably been someone just as smart and just as decisive as you, but know this.

"You're perfect just the way you are," I said.

"What?"

"I find your presence comforting."

Even this late into the game, Otoha, being the zombie otaku that she was, still managed to enjoy herself.

She had gone toe-to-toe with countless zombies and endured one life-threatening encounter after another, and she had never once shown any sign of weakness.

On the contrary, Otoha always reveled in it. It was as though her whole life had been building up to this very moment.

There was something about her enthusiasm that I—and Tetsuko and Shino, I imagined—found oddly comforting. The end was nowhere in sight, our future was uncertain, and yet here we were on a fun little camping trip. No existential dread, no sorrow, nothing.

And it was all thanks to Otoha.

"Thanks for that and everything else."

"Don't mention it."

That's not very generous of you. I'm on the brink of dying from embarrassment over here, and all I get in return is a brisk "Don't mention it"? Guess that's Otoha for ya.

"You know," Otoha said after a few moments, "I've always felt like I don't belong."

"Don't belong where?"

"In this world. I know I'm weird; I've been told as much by my family, my classmates, everybody. Again and again and again. You're pretty messed up even for a horror junkie, they said."

"I know what you mean."

I myself had been called all sorts of names by people who had only seen the world in black and white, thinking they were doing God's work by informing me of my flaws or something.

"Seeing the world brought to its knees, seeing zombies roam the streets... It made me feel warm inside. Finally, my time has come, I thought. Finally, I get to apply my knowledge to the real world. At the same time, it felt like they were right about me all along."

"I feel ya."

Our tormentors were gone, but their hurtful words had never left our minds. There they festered, inducing feelings of guilt and worthlessness, reminding us of our *weirdness*.

It took a toll, and a heavy one at that.

"So, umm, yeah." Otoha grew quiet, and for a few moments, we listened to the river babbling in the background. "Thanks."

"Come again?"

"Thanks... for the thanks."

I think I understand.

"And another thanks for having my back."

"As a wise woman once said, 'Don't mention it.'"

"No, really, I mean it. Without your gun expertise, your marksmanship, your military knowledge, and your quick wit, I wouldn't have made it this far either."

"Huh." The first three made sense, but that last one caught me by surprise.

I suppose being put through countless life-or-death situations in a VRFPS environment does wonders for one's quick-thinking skills.

"Only you could've convinced Shino what needed to be done. That's something to be proud of. Although you can be rather brash, forceful, and even pervy at times."

"You just had to include that last bit, didn't you?"

Could've ended on a high note, but no.

"You did try to spy on us earlier."

"Yeah, but..."

You have no idea what it's like being perpetually horny! Saying that would cement my reputation as a creep, though, so I'll just keep it to myself.

"I appreciate you for who you are, warts and all. I'm glad we met."

So... it's okay if I'm perpetually horny?

"I-I'm glad we met, too."

Good thing I have an excuse not to look her in the face. Thanks, binocu... lars?

"What is it?" Otoha asked, sensing a disturbance in the force.

"I think something just moved on the top of that building over there." I put away the binoculars and switched to the rifle.

It was one of few buildings over by the river, a big one made entirely of concrete. Judging from the shortage of windows, it was likely a factory or a research facility of some kind.

"Is it a zombie?" Otoha inquired gleefully.

I know you're into zombies and all, but please don't just blindly charge in, okay?

"I think so. Actually, wait." I couldn't tell what, but there was something *off* about its movements, so I adjusted the lens.

"What's the verdict?"

"It's... a human."

On top of the roof, there was a lone girl sitting in a wheelchair.



Shiiko Katsura was faced with her greatest obstacle yet: the chain-link fence.

It was rather short for a fence and purposefully so. It had been put up as a fall-prevention measure for maintenance workers who would have periodically checked up on the solar panels.

Your average healthy adult could climb over without so much as breaking a sweat, but to Shiiko, this would be a Herculean task.

Wheelchair-bound since early childhood, she couldn't stand on her own two feet without falling over, let alone walk. The one-meter-tall fence towered over her.

"Who needs legs when you've got arms? I sure don't." Shiiko gave herself a little pep talk, wheeled herself up to the fence, then grabbed onto it with her right hand, lifting herself up. Her left hand joined shortly after.



"You can do this. You can do this." Shiiko clambered up the fence, the metal digging into her hands. She rested her chin against the top rail, catching her breath, and then pushed herself over it.

Almost there. You've got this. You always have.

All she had to do now was fall.

I don't need anyone. I've got this! Just a little more and then off I g—

"STOP!" A male-sounding voice called out to her from the neighboring building, prompting Shiiko to lift her head up in surprise.

"How in the world—?!"

The site consisted of many tightly packed buildings. Atop the neighboring office building stood two people: a boy and a girl.

"Don't do anything stupid!" the guy yelled, twirling a rope tied to a crowbar as though it were a lasso. He then hurled the crowbar, which zoomed past in a satisfying arc and lodged itself against one of the nearby solar panels. "We'll be right there!"

Shiiko looked on in bewilderment as they began climbing along the rope. Seeing other living people was surprising enough, but the fact that they were about her age was even more of a shocker.

How did they get here?

For whatever reason, they were also interfering with Shiiko's suicide attempt.

"Can't even kill myself in... peace?"

At that moment, the boy fell to his doom.

"Help! Help!"

Or not. Presumably, he had some sort of safety device attached to his clothes.

He flailed around for a bit until the girl behind him pulled him back up, and then they were back on their way.



"Don't look down, don't look down," I mumbled, wriggling across like a caterpillar, arms and legs hugging the rope tightly.

"We don't have all day," Otoha said.

"I'm scared shitless!"

"You're not the only one. Now move."

"Why me?"

Tetsuko's rope techniques had turned out to be useful... that is, until the actual climbing part.

Who would've thought climbing ropes Navy SEAL style could be a little more daunting in practice? Well, look on the bright side; at least you didn't wet yourself earlier. You're the man.

While I was giving myself a morale boost, Otoha rudely interjected, "Faster, and stop shaking it. It's gonna break."

"Real helpful!"

Movies made it look easy, but in reality, it was anything but.

The rope swayed from side to side with even the slightest movement, and occasionally, I'd one-eighty and hang off the rope like a sloth. I had a carabiner hooked up to the rope and my belt, but it really didn't help to alleviate the fear factor.

"Less talking, more moving." She gave me a little shove.

"Watch it!"

"Move already."

Why you little... I never should've said all those nice things about you! I picked up the pace, cursing all the way through.

I slipped up twice after that, but thanks to the carabiner, I managed to get across scot-free.

"You almost gave me a heart attack!" I yelled at the suicidal girl, unhooking the carabiner.

"Wh-Who are you people?" she cried, wobbling back and forth on top of the fence like a hunk of jelly.

One little nudge would send her flying.

In these kinds of situations, you'd generally want to keep your distance and convince the person that life was worth living or something like that, but I wasn't in the mood. I walked right up to her and grabbed her by the leg without warning.

"Get your dirty hands off of me!" Her upper body squirmed in protest, revealing the contents of her skirt for all to see.

Blue-and-white stripes, how typical. Okay, wrap it up. Now's not the time to stare.

Tug as I might, she wasn't budging.

Ironically, it's like she's holding on for dear life!

"Let go! Let me go!"

"Need some help here!"

"Thought you'd never ask." Otoha came charging toward us with her trusty shovel in hand.

Whoa, Otoha! That's not what I meant!

Her shovel came crashing down on the top rail, mere centimeters away from where the girl's hands were, producing a deafeningly loud clang.

The resulting shockwave caused the girl to moan and loosen her grip, so I took advantage of her moment of weakness. I pulled her down, falling butt-first onto the ground, and she crash-landed into my arms.

Light as a feather, this one.

"Why?!" She flailed her arms about, her legs perfectly still. "Why won't you just let me die?!"

"You little—okay, look, this isn't going to solve anything!" I tried explaining as she continued to pull me by my hair, only to enrage her even more.

"Mind your own business, bub!"

"The last thing I need is you haunting my dreams, so yes, I *am* minding my own business, missy!"

My zombie family's got that covered, thank you very much!

If I were to give her the go-ahead, then stare her mangled corpse in the eyes knowing I could've put a stop to it, I would undoubtedly be traumatized by the experience.

"I can help out, if you'd like," Otoha said, lifting her shovel overhead.

"Otoha, you'd better not be thinking what I think you're thinking!" I screamed, shielding the girl with my body.

"I figured I'd just skip straight to the beheading part of seppuku."

"So you just want to decapitate her?!"

"It's what I do."

"I know, I know! Now would you please put that thing down?!"

Trust me, I've seen more than my fair share of decapitation in my lifetime.

"Girlie, if you don't want your head to get chopped off, maybe you should, I don't know, speak up?"

Huh, did she lose steam?

"You, um, you okay there, champ?" I would've checked, but she was facing away from me. Thankfully, there was someone else who could do it.

"She's sleeping," Otoha said, inspecting her face.

"Sleeping? Oh, she must've passed out."

Mustering up enough willpower to attempt suicide would surely be mentally draining.

No wonder she passed out right in my arms. At least, I'm pretty sure she did. I heaved a sigh and got back to my feet, still holding the girl. Otoha brought over the wheelchair, so I carefully placed her in it.

"Who are you?" I wondered aloud.

I'm sure the boys'll be all over you when you grow up.

Her narrow, combative eyes, like those of a feisty young cat, stood out the most, especially when she'd been shouting at me earlier. She was fairly cute, just like Shino and Otoha, but in more of a cheeky "You're wasting my time!" kind of way.

How someone like her had ended up in this predicament was beyond me.

"So, what now?"

"What do you mean?"

"She can't walk."

"Right." Otoha nodded, glancing at the wheelchair.

"Don't think we can climb our way back carrying a wheelchair or this little bugga. Let's hope the doors open from the inside."

We had left Shino and Tetsuko behind to rush over here. Time had been of the essence; we hadn't wanted to squander it by waking those two up.

Once we'd gotten to the building, we had frantically tried every entrance point we could find, but every one of them had been sealed off for good.

Out of options, we had run up the neighboring building's fire escape and climbed our way over here. In hindsight, that might not have been the best idea ever.

"I say we check in there first," Otoha proposed, staring at a shack tucked away in the corner of the roof.

Shiiko had a good memory. Great, even. She couldn't forget a single thing, not even if she wanted to.

"Say hi to your new home, Shiiko," her mom said as she wheeled Shiiko into a white, sanitary-looking room.

There was a closet and a desk against one wall, but it was otherwise empty and uninviting. Only a single PC adorned the desk, which made it feel all the more sterile.

"Quite exciting, isn't it?" The smile on her face looked unnatural, as if glued on. "You have the power to make the world a better place. Wouldn't want it to go to waste, now would we?" Her question came off as more of an implicit demand than anything else.

"Will I ever see you again?" Shiiko asked.

Aesthetics aside, the solitary confinement cell posing as a proper living space was meant for only one person, not an entire family.

"Of course you will. I promise."

Liar.

She forced the word back down her throat just before it could leave her lips.

Yes, Shiiko had a good memory indeed. She remembered all the hateful things her mom called her clear as day.

Night after night, her mother had done nothing but bemoan Shiiko's very existence over the phone.

"I'd give anything to get that failure out of my face."

Shiiko's name had never been explicitly mentioned during these conversations, but it hadn't taken long for her to put two and two together, and what followed were feelings of sadness and guilt.

Shiiko hadn't wanted to be a bad kid, so she had sworn to put a smile on her mom's face, to give her something to be proud of, to be a good kid.

In order to be a good kid, Shiiko had felt she needed to be a high achiever, so she'd decided to hit the books. And hit the books she had.

Shiiko had breezed past school, graduated college at the top of her class, written hundreds of English papers at the age of ten, and earned her doctorate.

She'd never had a father, so making her mom proud had been her one and only purpose. Alas, her efforts had all been in vain.

Of course she'd want me gone. Who wouldn't if they had to resort to artificial insemination and all they had to show for it was a good-for-nothing girl like me?

Shiiko was not a product of love between two caring parents, but rather a commodity, a tool... and a faulty one at that.

Her mother had gone to great lengths to secure an easy life for herself only to be met with disappointment.

Shiiko's motor cortex had been dysfunctional since birth, so it wasn't that she couldn't move; it was more that she didn't know how. Her legs were like strands of hair, limp and hanging from her body.

Her mother didn't care one bit about academic achievements. What she did care about was having a comfortable life in her golden years, which a physically disabled daughter had no means of supporting, at least in her mind.

Instead of wasting precious years of her life raising a faulty product, she had determined that a fresh start at motherhood would be the better choice.

"You'll love it here, Shiiko. Remember, North River Co..."

"...Is every researcher's dream." The slogan had been drilled into her mind through endless repetition.

North River Co. was a multinational technology company known for pioneering a multitude of cutting-edge inventions. Hundreds of millions of bright minds all across the globe aspired to become part of it.

Shiiko now found herself in the lab four, which was one of the twelve labs in Japan. They were primarily located in suburban areas.

"Bright minds from all across Japan—no, the globe—can only dream of setting foot inside these walls, and yet here you are. Isn't it incredible?"

"If you say so."

"Trust me, it's for your own good. You're destined for great things, Shiiko. Don't let me hold you back."

An overly caring mother who just wanted to provide her genius daughter with the ideal research environment... Even Shiiko found this charade somewhat sad.

Why can't you just up and say that I'm worth less to you than the wad of cash you traded me for?

It was human trafficking in the guise of a scholarship. Although Shiiko hadn't seen the contract, she was almost certain she'd be slaving away at North River Co. till the end of her days.

Naturally, the money would go on to feed and fund her future, non-defective little brother or sister.

"I'll be going now. Hang in there." Shiiko's mom turned her back and walked off with a light spring in her step, as though a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. At last, the debt from her unfortunate biological gamble all those years ago had finally been repaid.

Shiiko didn't shed a single tear.

Maybe this is why no one ever liked me, she thought to herself.

"Shiiko Katsura, I presume?" A kind-looking woman entered in her mom's stead.

She had the North River Co. badge pinned to her chest and wore a pair of silver-rimmed glasses over her slightly droopy eyes.

"Yes?"

"I'm your caretaker, Noriko Ohara. Pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine," Shiiko replied flatly.



As our luck would have it, the security systems in place were fully operational, and we had exactly zero key cards in our possession.

We couldn't make our way down to the lower floors, let alone exit the building.

Things weren't looking pretty.

As a last-ditch effort, I sent Otoha back the way we came to inform Shino and Tetsuko about our predicament. The girl showed no signs of waking the entire time.

Must've been really tired, I thought.

"There's nothing I can do." Tetsuko's muffled voice spilled out from the walkie-talkie I had set on the windowsill at max volume.

Apparently, we'd had a pair of walkie-talkies that'd once been used for hunting trips stashed away in the car. Otoha had brought one back with her.

"The security systems are military grade—nigh impenetrable. You've likely stumbled across a top-secret research facility, if I had to guess."

"Sounds about right."

What business does an elementary schooler have in a place like this, though?

"On the bright side, at least you made it in time. How's she doing?"

"She's sleeping," Otoha answered. The girl was still passed out in the wheelchair.

"Keep an eye on her. She's clearly not thinking straight."

"Really now?" I muttered.

Suicide's a quick and easy out. It's perfectly understandable why you'd want to go down that road; there's not much to live for. Not anymore, at least.

"Her name's Shiiko Katsura, by the way," Otoha added.

"And you know this... how?" I asked.

"That's what it says." Otoha pointed to the palm-sized name tag pinned to the girl's chest, which read "Shiiko Katsura, Lab #2."

So, she's from a laboratory. Seems like Tetsuko was right.

"Maybe she works here?"

I gave her a look. "This pipsqueak? Get outta here."

"Don't judge a book by its cover."

You win this round, Otoha.

"Mmm?" Suddenly, the girl stirred and rubbed her eyes.

Look who's up.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

"Huh?" She pried her eyes open, blinked twice, and sat there absentmindedly for a few moments. "Noriko? Keith?"

"Who?"

As Otoha and I were busy exchanging confused glances, she squinted her eyes, blinked a few more times, and then said, "Do I know you?"

"I'm Hiroaki Dewa, and this here's Otoha Judou." She continued to glare at us without saying a word. "You're Shiiko, right?" I asked, hoping she hadn't just wandered in here and slapped on a random name tag.

She didn't reply, but the slight facial twitch was all I needed to know that she was the real deal.

"So, uh..."

It'd be awfully silly to ask "Don't you know that suicide is bad?" and act all high and mighty when I have no idea what her story is. Let's just hope she doesn't hit me with the classic "Why'd you do it?" question. I don't know how to answer that one.

"Why'd you stop me?" Shiiko asked, her tone sharp.

Crap.

"You know, because, well—"

"Let me guess: 'cause suicide is bad? Seriously, why?"

"What kind of question is that? If you'd gone and done the thing, erm, you would've hurt all your family and friends." Without thinking, I'd blurted out some generic, anti-suicide talking point, which appeared to rub her the wrong way.

Thankfully, she didn't start straight up yelling at me, but she did look visibly ticked off.

"Unlikely. My family sold me, and my friends abandoned me."

"Huh?" That was the best response I could manage given the bombshell she had just dropped on us.

Sold by her parents, abandoned by her friends...

"Was this after the zombie apocalypse?"

Shiiko gently shook her head in response to Otoha's question. "The latter, yes; the former, no. Much like a disillusioned pet owner, Mom couldn't be bothered to keep this *eyesore* around anymore. Rather than have the courtesy to put me down, she chose to sell me instead."

"Are you serious?"

It's like she thinks of herself as a household pet or an old tea kettle. Jeez, I can only imagine how badly she must've been treated for it to come to this.

"If she's not gonna do it, I may as well do it myself," Shiiko spat. "Try not to get in my way next time. I have a right to my own life, and by extension, I also have a right to do with it as I see fit. That includes stripping it away. What right do *you* have to take that away from me?"

Yes, you're free to do what you please with your life, and we can't make you reconsider, but still—

"We don't," Otoha said flatly, derailing my train of thought.

"Are you trying to make things worse?" I protested, though I myself had no idea what to say to this girl.

With Shino, I'd had ample time to think and the added benefit of being fairly close friends, neither of which applied here.

To make matters worse, her dread seemed to be rooted in misanthropy, meaning idealistic babble would do little to persuade her.

In that case...

"We're looking for a safe place to stay. There's currently four of us, and we wouldn't mind an extra set of hands. We stopped you because it serves our pragmatic interests. So, what do you say?"

A post hoc rationalization, to be sure, but true nonetheless. I figured that if a moral argument was doomed to fail, I should opt for a rational one instead.

"I'm nothing but a burden," Shiiko said, lowering her gaze down to her legs. "Without this wheelchair, I'm nothing. Do you really think it'd be a good idea to take me with you?"

"I, erm..." Shiiko had a point, seeing as we were struggling to do something as simple as leave a damn building.

Say she had a key card in her possession, and we managed to escape. What then? Again, say we somehow managed to fit the wheelchair inside the G-Wagen. What then?

"Don't worry about me." For the first time, Shiiko smiled. "I'm used to it." Her tone was soft, as though she were consoling us.

Used to what? Being disposable?!

"She couldn't be bothered to raise me, so she sold me like merchandise. Zombie apocalypse happened, and everyone abandoned me. I lost contact with Keith and even Noriko..." Her voice began quivering toward the end, and a stream of tears followed, as though something had burst inside of her. "Even Noriko..."

"Shiiko, I..."

Call it a hunch, but this Noriko person must've been the last thing keeping Shiiko from plunging into the depths of misanthropy. With Noriko out of the picture, Shiiko lost all faith in humanity.

"It's okay, I'm used to it." Shiiko said again, wiping the tears away with her sleeve. "Go on without me. I'll do what I have to do, just... stay out of my way." The strength in her voice faded, reduced to a whimpering plea, providing a brief glimpse into the true depths of her grief.



We decided to stay the night inside the building. Evidently, it had belonged to North River Co., a passive foreign investment company. Remarkably, English reigned supreme here; the indoor map, the precautionary statement, and even the door signs were all in English.

While we hadn't brought any food supplies, we did find two boxes of chocolate cookies and a hot-cold water dispenser, which helped keep us feeling full. On the top floor alone, there were three water dispensers. In addition to water, they also served coffee, green tea, and black tea, likely as a morale booster.

"Why didn't we call them over?" I wondered aloud.

With all the security measures in place, the building was clearly more secure than the sandbank ever could've been. Then again, it was no bomb shelter, meaning it was equally susceptible to a nuclear meltdown, according to Otoha.

"Breathtaking, isn't it?"

Otoha and I were in the computer room. There was something oddly soothing about being surrounded by all those monitors, displays, and whatnot. Probably a carryover from our hardware store days.

Incidentally, Shiiko's name tag doubled as a key card, but she had told us we couldn't go to any of the lower floors. Getting past the locks wouldn't be an issue, but the zombies certainly would. The reason we hadn't come across any zombies was because the building had been put on lockdown to keep them at bay.

We could see zombies wandering about on the displays in front of us, which were hooked to the building's many CCTV cameras.

Each floor had a bunch of rooms boasting a fairly intricate layout. If we were able to pinpoint each zombie's location, getting down might not be impossible.

"If the elevators were still working, getting down would be easy. But then what?"

As our luck would have it, the first floor was simply teeming with zombies. Better yet, all three elevators were located far away from the entrance.

We could try barging past the zombies, but the wheelchair almost guarantees we'll be surrounded in an instant.

"Oh, and Hiroaki," Otoha said, "I see you've gone back to calling her 'Shino.'"

"Urk!" I froze up like a crook caught red-handed.

Relax, you've done nothing wrong, I tried to convince myself.

"She insisted on getting the Otoha treatment, not me."

"And how do you explain Uemura?"

"She's my superior!"

You really think I've got the balls to call her by her first name? Get outta town.

"Suuure." Otoha peered into my eyes, her head tilted to one side. The signature deadpan expression made it hard to get a read on her.

"Anyway, how should we go about this?" I opted to change the subject. "How do we save her?"

"We don't."

"Come on, now."

"There's no getting around the fact that we're out of options."

"She's just a kid, Otoha." For a brief moment, memories of when Yoshiaki was in elementary school and we still got along bubbled to the surface, then burst just as quickly. "We can't just leave her out here. Like, on a moral level."

"Says the guy who's hellbent on deciding her life for her."

"She's gonna off herself, Otoha."

"That's her choice to make," she replied without flinching.

"Yeah, you're right." Insisting that suicide was bad to someone who was perfectly aware of the consequences and nevertheless felt like it was the only solution wouldn't help anyone. "It's not about whether it's right or wrong; I think *I'm* the problem." I shrugged my shoulders.

I don't want other people to die. I don't want to see them die. It doesn't sit well with me. Ego, that's all there is to it.

"By the way, what're you doing?" I said, looking down at Otoha.

She was sitting in front of a computer, her hands moving about. "Trying to get the net back up."

"And how's that going?"

"Not great."

"Lemme have a look." I walked up behind her and peered at the screen.

Why didn't I think of that?

Field Battle's servers, among many others, had still been up and running during the initial phases of the apocalypse, allowing me to "no life" so hard that I hadn't even noticed.

As time went on, the connection had gotten progressively worse, to the point where I'd stopped booting up my phone almost entirely. Ethernet, however, might just do the trick.

The last thing a PFIC specializing in cutting-edge technology would've wanted was a data leak. That being the case, they might've even had a private network for safe data transfers. It was certainly worth investigating.

Actually, if all the company's buildings had similar security measures in place, it might be worth making one into a permanent base, assuming it wasn't anywhere near a nuclear power plant.

"It's asking for a password."

The password field was empty.

"No way."

"What's the password?"

"How should I know?" I brought the keyboard closer and began entering random passwords, common sense stuff like the company name and all that. Wouldn't you know it, none of them went through.

I sighed. "It's a lost cause... Wait a sec." An insider might know the password, and we've got exactly one of 'em. "I'll go ask Shiiko."



Shiiko sat by a window, overlooking the street below.

A zombie occasionally emerged from the shadows as it passed by the evenly spaced streetlights, attracting Shiiko's inquisitive gaze.

She didn't have a set goal in mind. Observation simply came as naturally to her as breathing. If it didn't, she never would have made it this far. She derived her self-worth almost exclusively from her ability to observe, analyze, and hypothesize—the hallmark of any competent researcher.

"It's okay," she told herself. "There's nothing to worry about. You've got this."

North River Co. had always valued results above all else.

Shiiko had been granted the perfect research environment. In exchange, she'd had to provide results, or else it would have been stripped away from her.

The higher-ups hadn't cared about potential or unexpected setbacks. They'd valued one thing and one thing only: results. Those who hadn't been able to provide them with results had been treated as worthless.

Shiiko had devoted herself to her research as though she were under observation herself.

The pressure would have been enough to break any fourteen-year-old, but luckily for Shiiko, her caretaker, Noriko, had always been looking out for her.

"Genius, Shiiko, pure genius! People tend to think I'm smart because I wear glasses, but I'm nowhere near your level. Besides, it's pretty discriminatory to assume women who wear glasses are capable of anything, don't you think?"

One couldn't even begin to imagine what an impact Noriko had had on Shiiko. She had looked after Shiiko with so much care, one might've thought they were sisters or mother and daughter. Noriko had been by Shiiko's side not only on weekdays but on weekends as well.

Her single-minded devotion couldn't have been brushed off as Noriko simply doing her job; there had been so much more to it than that.

"Heard you beat your own record on the eight-sample experiment again?"

Noriko hadn't been the only one looking out for Shiiko. There had also been Keith Wayne, one of North River Co.'s senior managers who'd transferred directly from their HQ.

With his blond hair, sparkly blue eyes, and well-defined facial features, Keith had been the stereotypical Westerner. Despite his position on the totem pole, he had always gone out of his way to be humble and kind.

Keith hadn't been by Shiiko's side 24/7, as he'd overseen multiple labs. Still, he had occasionally shown his face around lab four to check on the results.

"She sure did, Keith," Noriko had replied at the time. "Shiiko's genius knows no bounds!"

"How come you're always the one jumping for joy?"

"I'm compensating for Shiiko's lack of excitement, naturally."

"Shiiko, if she ever gets on your nerves, you know who to call."

"I heard that!"

Keith had valued results like the rest of the higher-ups at North River Co., but what set him apart had been his generous definition of "results."

The man had always had an intuitive sense for people. He could've gotten a read on someone's potential from the tiniest of details, invisible or

incomprehensible to most. Most of the time, he would've considered that discovered potential a result in and of itself.

Occasionally, he had even drawn out potential in Shiiko that neither she nor Noriko had been aware of to begin with.

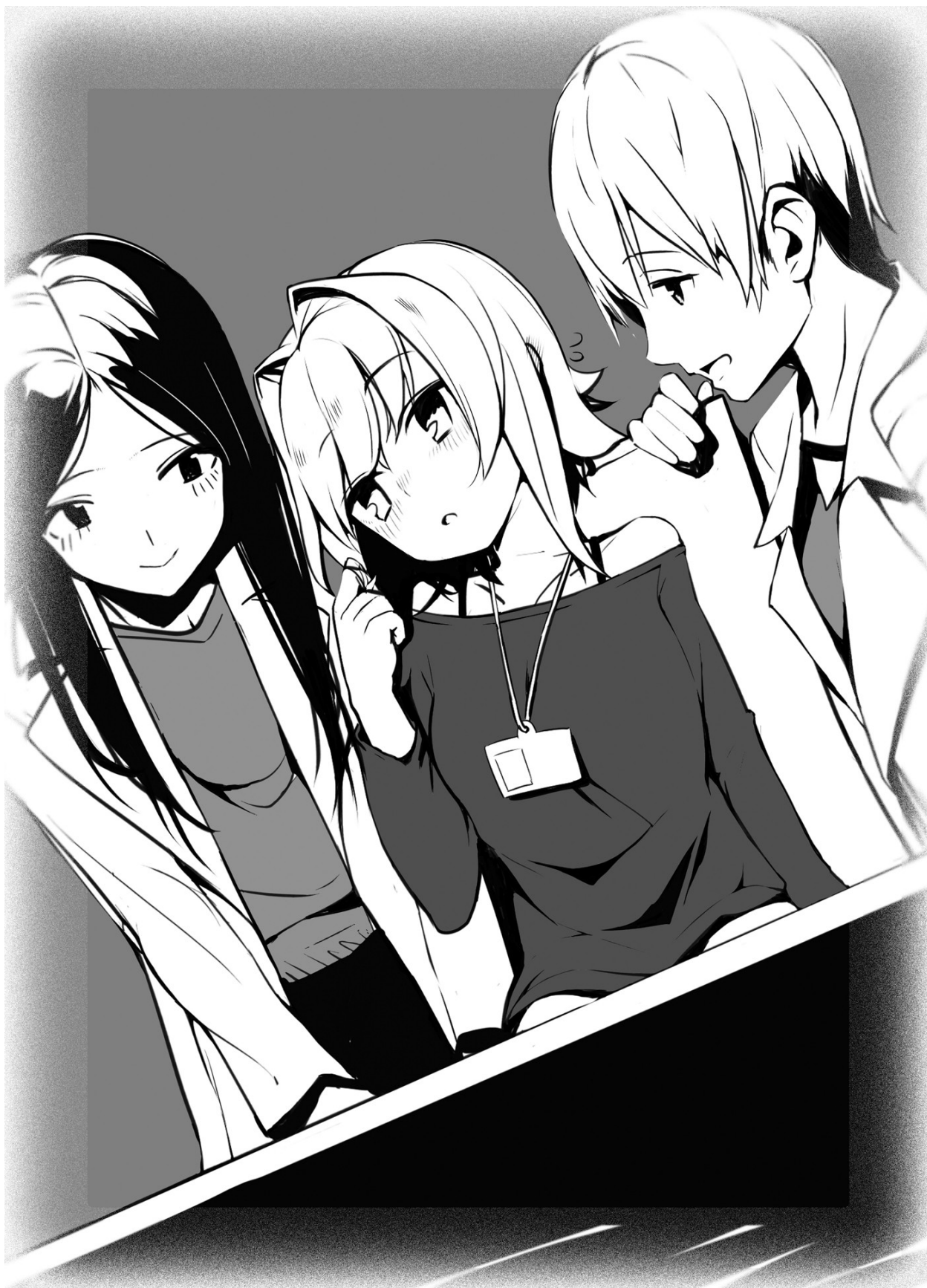
"Don't be shy. You've got plenty to be proud of, Shiiko," he had said to her once.

"You got your PhD at twelve years old," Noriko had added. "Twelve! If that's not amazing, I don't know what is."

"Well put, Noriko. Shiiko, you should let loose a little. Bask in your glory and give the others a chance to feel proud of their work for once."

It would be no exaggeration to say that these two had saved Shiiko.

A lonely wunderkind abandoned by her parents had finally found a place she could call her own.



The work had been tough but fulfilling. For the first time in her life, Shiiko had felt content. She'd wished it could last forever.

Then, everything had fallen apart.

"I'll be back with a bunch of stuff. Hang in there."

It had happened about a week into the zombie apocalypse.

Shiiko, failing to escape in time because of her disability, had been left behind by everyone except Noriko.

The government had been of no use, and they had lost contact with Keith.

Although they'd had plenty of water, the food supply had started running low. Shiiko had been subsisting on nothing but her beloved chocolate for the past few days, and even that had nearly run out.

Noriko had told her that she would go out to procure food supplies. She had made her way down to the first floor using the stairs and the fire escape, gotten into her car, and driven off.

Shiiko had waited and waited and waited some more.

By the fifth day, she had finally come to terms with the fact that Noriko wasn't coming back.

She'd felt betrayed at first. Then it had occurred to her that maybe Noriko really *had* only worked with her for the money. Maybe she had only ever been nice to Shiiko because Shiiko's performance had impacted her own evaluations.

The company had fallen apart. Money had become meaningless. As a result, Noriko would've no longer had any reason to care.

Shiiko heaved a sigh.

She felt lost, confused.

It had taken a while, but even Noriko had managed to abandon work in the end. Shiiko, on the other hand, didn't—no, couldn't—stop the never-ending cycle of observing, analyzing, and hypothesizing.

It was all she had left, all she could do. It was pure torture.

A zombie appeared from the darkness and then disappeared once more.

They appear to be following a pattern, Shiiko noted.

Her mind bustled with countless possibilities, going through them one by one as though it were a fun little mental exercise.

What could it possibly be?

The fact that they were mimicking past behavioral patterns had been established by now, but Shiiko's observations led her to believe that there was a missing variable.

Every zombie, without exception, exhibited periodic bouts of inactivity. Presumably, they were saving energy, but why? Why would a corpse seek to preserve itself? Could it be buying time? If so, to what end?

A corpse is a corpse. It's going to rot away. It isn't capable of engaging in rational thought. Even if we were to generously assume that its nervous

system was partly intact, it wouldn't matter much without a functioning cerebrum.

Actually, if we were to go back even further, both its cerebrum and cerebellum had to have suffered irreversible damage due to a lack of oxygen supply. Then why is it capable of high-level actions, such as walking or attacking living people?

Shiiko shelved her thoughts for the time being, spun her wheelchair around, and headed over to the table in the corner of the room.

A box of chocolate cookies rested on the table. Shiiko reached inside, almost subconsciously, but the familiar sensation refused to grace her fingertips.

The cookie she'd had right before her failed suicide attempt had turned out to be her last.

Although there was an extra box lying around in the other room, she couldn't be bothered to go get it. She also didn't feel like running into those two again.

They probably ate it anyway.

Shiiko sighed, then collected the remaining crumbs with her fingers and licked them off. The sugary, melt-in-your-mouth sensation lifted her spirits just a tiny bit.

"It'll help you think," Keith had said once, handing her one. There hadn't been a single cookieless day since.

Noriko's gone, and Keith's not answering. Maybe they're both... They're both...

"You there, Shiiko?" Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, followed by the guy's voice.

Hiroaki, was it? Hiroaki Dewa.

"Can I come in?"

"Knock yourself out," Shiiko offhandedly answered.

Do I care? No, I don't care about anything.



"Wonder what they're hiding," I muttered to myself as I walked down the hall.

Cameras positioned specifically to minimize the number of blind spots, key card access floors, partitions that could wall off entire floors... The security measures were drastic to say the least.

"Err, guess I should say 'what they were hiding.'" I made my way over to Shiiko's room, clutching a box of chocolate cookies from some foreign brand.

Y'know, aren't these the same cookies the zombie girl from earlier was hoarding? I guess you could say they're to die for.

Sorry, I had to.

To tell you the truth, I wasn't much of a fan. They were a little too sweet for my liking, both the piece of chocolate inside and the cookie itself.

I imagine it's good for stocking up on carbs, though.

Otoha and I had finished the box without really thinking about it, and then the realization that these were Shiiko's precious food supplies had hit.

I figured the right thing to do would be to give it back to her, profusely apologizing in the process.

Then again, Shiiko'll probably reject it, seeing as she was hellbent on killing herself, but it's still worth a shot.

I knocked on her door.

"Can I come in?"

"Knock yourself out." I could almost see the sulky expression accompanying her tone.

Got permission. May as well make the best of it.

"I need to ask you something." Shiiko was sitting in her wheelchair in the middle of the room with a gloomy look on her face, just as I had imagined. The room looked clean but was uncannily empty; there was nothing in it but a table and a PC.

Did she live here? Wait, there's no bed. This must be her dedicated office or something along those lines.

"Oh, and here." I held up the empty cookie box.

"You—"

"We ate a whole box by accident. Sorry 'bout that." I set the box down on the desk.

"It's fine," Shiiko said. "Not like I'm going to need it."

Told ya.

In any case, I knew proselytizing wasn't going to do us any good, so I just thanked my lucky stars for sparing me the scolding and cut straight to the chase.

"There's something we need to look into, but the PCs are all password-protected."

"What did you expect? They're the company's computers." Shiiko moved over to her desk. "You can use mine if you like."

"That's awfully kind of you." I walked up behind her and gazed at the screen.

Wait a minute...

"I'll give you the password, but only under one condition."

"What's that?"

"Promise me you'll mind your own business from now on."

In other words, "Let me kill myself in peace."

"Promise me that, and you can take the cookies, the water dispensers, whatever. I'll even give you this key card so you can search the building. The security room should have some leftover weapons."

"That's nice."

Though turning a blind eye to a young girl jumping off a roof sounds kinda rough. What's the plan here?

I mulled it over for a bit before I decided to simply change the subject. I figured that if I got to know her better, it might open up a new way forward.

"Are these chocolate cookies, like, real popular or what?"

"Huh?"

"This morning, we saw a zombie in a shopping mall who had a whole bunch of these, too. Zombies have this tendency to, y'know, repeat what they did when they were alive, so it's kinda funny to think that one used to hoard sweets in its past life."

A little too much sugar for my liking, but I could imagine someone loving it. Our tastes were colored by our cultural background and personal experiences, after all. The concept of food culture existed for a reason.

"A zombie?"

"Yup, it was absolutely obsessed."

The moment Shino had reached out for one of the boxes, the zombie had immediately pounced on her. The most likely explanation was that Shino had simply gotten too close. At least, that was what I figured. Looking at it another way, however, the zombie could've been defending its precious chocolate cookies.

"Women sure love their sweets, don't they? Can't say I relate, personally spea—"

"What did she—" Shiiko blurted, practically shouting by this point.

"Sorry. What did *it* look like?"

"Hm?"

"What kind of zombie was it? What was it wearing?" Shiiko, who hadn't seemed all that interested in chatting with me, had suddenly grown awfully invested.

Her sudden change in attitude was a tad concerning, but I couldn't let an opportunity like this pass me by, so I kept going.

"The kind that crawls across floors, I guess? I remember its clothes being dirty. Didn't get to see much of its face, though, what with the hair draped over it. It wore glasses, too—silver-rimmed ones, if memory serves."

Shiiko's lips quivered uncontrollably for a while before she collapsed in her chair, completely dejected.

"What're you doing, Noriko?"

"Noriko?" I echoed. Shiiko lifted her head up. "Isn't she...?"

Isn't Noriko one of the people Shiiko mentioned? The ones who abandoned her. Judging from her tone, they must've been close, unlike her and the other employees.

I continued, "Does that mean what I think it means?"

Although Shiiko just sat there in silence, chewing on her fingernails as though fighting to keep something suppressed, I had a pretty good idea of what was going on in her mind.

"Those chocolate cookies were your favorite, weren't they?" Shiiko maintained her staunch silence. "It's all coming together now."

Hook, line, and sinker.

"Noriko wanted you to have those chocolate cookies so bad, even death itself couldn't stop her from trying. That's how much she cared."

"Quit running your goddamn mouth!" Shiiko slammed her palm on the table. "You know nothing! They abandoned me, both of them! That zombie is just some nobody who liked these a little too much!" Shiiko grabbed the box and threw it at me.

"Watch it!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Shiiko thrashed around in her wheelchair, screaming, "They tossed me aside just like those cookies! Everybody does! That's all my life ever will be, abandonment after abandonment after abandonment."

I remembered her telling me about how her mom had sold her. That must've scarred her deeply. It bled into her views, her thoughts, and everything else.

The thought lingered like a dark cloud, taunting her. No matter how close she got to someone, they'd abandon her eventually. After all, even her own mother had.

She couldn't bear to get her hopes up or allow herself to be happy; she had to detach herself, or else the pain would consume her.

Shiiko had to convince herself that she had been abandoned, that it was par for the course and not worth grieving over, as it was her single emotional barrier.

"They abandoned me!" Shiiko cried shrilly. "So it's fine!"

It's "fine" for her to abandon her own worthless, meaningless life and finally have peace. That's what she's thinking.

I looked at her and said, "I can work with that."

You're really not making this easy on me, you little brat!

"Huh?"

"You said it yourself: you were abandoned. That's exactly what happened. You said it, so it must be true."

Shiiko must've been caught off guard by that one; she just gawked at me in silence.

You're the smartest person I know, but you're too stupid to realize just how ridiculous you sound right now. Anyway, now for the clincher.

I knelt down to her level, looked her in the eyes, and said, "Shiiko Katsura, you were abandoned."

She winced.

It's fine when you say it, but not when other people say it. Pretty common. Self-deprecation is just a defense mechanism people use to protect themselves from the scorn and disdain of other, stronger individuals. I of all people would know.

"That's why I'm here. I've come to pick you back up."

"What?"

"You've been dropped, right? Well, first come, first served. You're mine now. I own you." I placed my right hand on the back of her chair and continued the onslaught. "Don't you dare die or go off somewhere without my permission; I'm not having any of that. Remember, you're mine now."

"Y-You can't do that!"

"You don't belong to anyone. They all left you behind. Heck, you've even abandoned yourself. I don't see the problem, so yeah, you're mine, all mine. Don't worry, I'm the kind of guy who never throws out anything. Never know when you might need it. My room feels awfully small because of it, though."

Instead of throwing out or selling my old gun controllers, I had always stuffed them into boxes stacked on top of the bookshelf. That "junk" ended up having a purpose after all—namely, saving me from being eaten alive by my own mother.

"Actually, I think I need you right now. Collect data, now. Pronto! Hop to it!"

Shiiko stared at me in disbelief for a few moments, then averted her gaze.

"What a complete moron."

You're not wrong, but there are some things only a moron can do.

"Hey, Hiroaki." Otoha popped out from out of nowhere. "What's the... hold-up?"

If I had to guess, she probably got bored waiting and came to voice her complaints.

She looked at me, then at Shiiko, then blinked twice. "So, you've shown your true colors."

"What are you talking about?! And can you please put that thing down?!" It was only then that I noticed what was wrong with this picture.

Guy bent over a girl's wheelchair, hand on the back seat, his face centimeters away from hers. To a bystander, this would look awfully suspect, like I was trying to have my way with her or something.

"Using her disability to get what you want, despicable."

"I would never, ever do such a—"

"He said he owns me now."

Yeah, okay, I did! But I didn't mean it in a sexual way! Otoha, you're getting the wrong idea yet again!

"Hiroaki..."

"Cross my heart and hope to die!"

I desperately pleaded for my life as Otoha lifted her shovel overhead with the fury of a thousand suns.



"We're in," Shiiko said, turning to look at us over her shoulder.

She had just managed to access North River Co.'s intranet, which spanned from its southernmost lab in Okinawa all the way to the far reaches of Hokkaido.

"Don't get your hopes up," she added coldly.

Apparently, she and Noriko had tried accessing the company's intranet on more than one occasion and had been met with disappointment each and every time. No matter which lab they had tried, no one had answered their

messages; the facilities had either been completely abandoned or teeming with zombies.

While the two of them had gotten access to a treasure trove of data stored by each individual lab, it had been no help whatsoever in saving them from their predicament.

Incidentally, it was possible to connect to the internet via intranet, which was what we were aiming for.

"If that's English, then I'm the pope," I muttered. The data on the screen was an endless wall of technobabble; more than half of it was complete gibberish to me. "I've heard the name here and there, but I never bothered looking into it, so mind cluing me in on what North River Co. was all about? Like, what did it do?"

"Hard to say," Shiiko replied, windows popping in and out of existence as her fingers danced across the keyboard and mouse. "It dove headfirst into every single promising field, so pretty much everything and anything. Here at lab four, we developed our fair share of cutting-edge technology."

"How cutting-edge we talkin'?"

Like, giant fighting robots?

"Nanomachines, for instance."

"You mean those tiny little machines that're invisible to the naked eye?"

"Precisely. In the electronics realm, we had quantum computers, seventh-generation AI, and so on. One of our AIs even passed the Turing test, if memory serves. Oh, and Japan's loose pharmaceutical and medical regulations made for a thriving chemistry field. When it comes to high-level stuff like nanomachines, however, the line between electronics and chemistry gets a bit blurry. Nanomachines run on infrared molecular engines, which..."

She launched into an articulate speech, so I just waited for her to finish as half of it flew over my head and then said, "Yes, indeed."

This girl's a real genius.

I looked at Otoha, who nodded ever so slightly with her usual poker face.

Thank God I wasn't the only one.

"More recently, we—" Suddenly, Shiiko fell silent.

"Something wrong?" Peeking over Shiiko's shoulder, I took a look at the screen.

Her eyes were open wide, her hands frozen in place. The display showed a list of names accompanied by their respective photos.

"Keith," she murmured.

Isn't Keith the guy Shiiko mentioned in the same breath as Noriko?

I took a look. Staring back at me was Keith Wayne, a dapper white guy you'd probably figure was a model at first glance. Beside his name, it said "Japan Branch General Manager."

A young executive, huh?

Looks, power, fat stacks of cash—he'd had it all.

My normie sensors are going wild.

Brief feelings of jealousy stirred inside yours truly, a former shut-in gamer, but they were soon replaced by sheer curiosity.

"Why, hello there." Multiple wavy lines and numbers besides his picture shifted at fixed intervals. "What's that, Shiiko?"

"That's the real-time health monitoring system at work. It's still in its infancy, mind you."

As Shiiko had stated earlier, North River Co. hadn't shied away from the medical field.

By simply interacting with one of several contactless sensors scattered across the building, one could have monitored their health status at their convenience. Body temperature, pulse, complexion, stool composition—the system could do it all automatically and even without the user knowing. Physical examinations had never been easier.

Due to considerable privacy concerns, the initial trials had been run exclusively on volunteers.

"Sounds nice, but can it pick up on the early signs of cancer?"

"Presently, no, but it was slated to in the foreseeable future," Shiiko mumbled, her mind drifting elsewhere.

She seems shocked for some reason. Oh, I think I get it.

"If this is real-time," I said, pointing to the cardiogram, "wouldn't that mean he's very much alive?"

"It would, but it doesn't feel real." Shiiko blinked over and over, still stunned.

"He's alive. Shouldn't you be ecstatic?"

"I tried contacting him countless times and never heard back. Lab one has been inactive this whole time too. It couldn't have reactivated by itself, could it?" Shiiko said, averting her gaze. She then started furiously typing away on her keyboard. "He's not picking up. That leaves three options: he's in no position to answer, the call equipment is broken, or the system is simply bugging out and Keith is actually... dead."

Otoha and I exchanged glances.

Shiiko was so accustomed to everything being stripped away from her that she had learned not to get her hopes up.

Although I had been able to quash her suicidal thoughts by giving her the Hiroaki Treatment (patent pending), old habits die hard.

"But there's still hope," Shiiko said, refuting my beliefs.

"For what?"

"Not number two, not number three, but number one! If Keith is still alive, and lab one's research object is still intact, we... we might just be able to save the world!"

We got the message loud and clear, despite Shiiko's rambly delivery.

"Save..."

"The world?" Otoha finished for me.

Shiiko whipped her wheelchair over to us. "Maybe not save it. More like, prevent this from ever happening."

"Still not following."

Sounds too good to be true. Oh man, is she gonna say what I think she's gonna say?

"Keith was working on a time machine in lab number one. Err, I should say he supervised the operation since he wasn't much of a scientist himself."

"A what?!"

Needless to say, we were completely taken aback.

Like, the kind people find in drawers, cars clocks, and even tunnels? That sci-fi classic? The same one that allows you to leap forward or backward in time?!

"It's probably a little different from what you're imagining, I'm afraid," Shiiko said with a wry smile. "Physically traveling back in time is not feasible, but sending data back is, according to the latest research."

"Data? What do you mean?"

"The researchers tried sending back matter at first, without success. Then, in an attempt to surmount the law of conservation of energy, they tried sending back something other than matter—data, in other words."

To sum up her subsequent monologue:

The total energy in an isolated system remains constant.

Rest mass can be converted to or from equivalent amounts of energy.

If time machines existed, and one were to go back in time, the energy conserved in their rest mass would disappear into the past, violating the laws of physics.

Someone over at North River Co. had come up with the brilliant idea to simply send back data, which had no mass, thereby avoiding said effect.

"That sounds... wow." On the one hand, I had a hard time believing my ears. On the other, it almost felt fitting.

How outrageous can a time machine really be when we've got zombies roaming the streets?

"If Keith's still alive, we might be able to send data back to a point in time before the apocalypse and prevent this tragedy from happening.

Ergo..."

We can save the world.

Something welled up deep inside of me, a feeling so powerful I could barely keep still.

At that moment, one of Raven's lines came to mind.

"Survive, and humanity may flourish once again."

Despite her NPC status, Raven had spoken as though she'd known all the answers to our problems with lines like "Gather your party, collect resources, fight side by side, and you too can be victorious! Always remember, teamwork makes the dream work!" and "In order to reset, you will have to clear the newly released campaign."

Initially, I had been under the impression that someone was trying to pass themselves off as Raven, but what if she had known about the time

machine all along? What if she had subtly led us to Shiiko without us even knowing it?

"Yo, Hiroaki." Otoha stood beside me, blinking away tears as though she had seen that same glimmer of hope that I had.

We'll iron out the specifics as we go. For now, I know what we have to do.

"Otoha, we're—"

"Going," she declared. "I'm still skeptical about whether this supposed miracle device really does exist, though."

So am I, but it's better to cling to every last bit of hope than to run away from the inevitable.

"Shiiko, didn't you say there were weapons stashed away in the security room?"

"The kind that'd get you arrested on the spot, yes."

For a private company, North River Co.'s security measures were no laughing matter, seeing as some of their cutting-edge technology could be repurposed for combat use. I wondered if we'd even find guns or explosives.

The way forward is practically rolling out before us. It's either do or die! my inner gamer roared.

"That settles it. We're going, and you're coming with us, Shiiko. To Keith's place!"

She gave my outstretched hand a funny look, then turned up her nose. "I-If you insist."



A lone PC booted up with a subdued beep inside a dreary room. The light hum of running fans was all that filled the silence.

Images flashed across the screen, settling on Shiiko's photograph.

"Shiiko Katsura: North River Co., lab four. Access confirmed."

Her picture was replaced by security camera footage. A bright red "LIVE" icon flickered in and out of existence in the bottom left-hand corner.

"Alive... just... we... save... world!"

A muffled voice, drowned out by white noise, echoed throughout the empty room.

"Data... before the... tragedy... happening."

In response to Shiiko's voice, the word "IDENTIFIED" popped up on the screen.

"ID identification complete. Image identification complete. Voice identification complete. Shiiko Katsura. Status: Alive."



I entered a bathroom stall and switched my phone on for the first time in what felt like an eternity. I was greeted by none other than *Field Battle's* official website.

Needless to say, smartphones didn't come close to meeting the spec requirements to run a VRFPS game, but the official website had a

messenger function and various minigames to provide players with entertainment outside the main game.

Upon logging in, the game's guide, a.k.a. Raven, would pop in and tell the player all the latest news about the game.

Naturally, one would expect her to be absent seeing as there was no news to speak of, thanks to the apocalypse. Oh, but they'd be in for a surprise.

"Welcome, Hound Nine." Raven's miniature character greeted me with a smile on her face.

"Long time no see," I said, eyes locked on her fabricated smile. The built-in voice-to-text feature spared me the trouble of having to type out my thoughts. It felt just like any old conversation. "Loving the new campaign, by the way. Teamwork makes the dream work, was it?"

"Glad to hear you're making progress."

"Sure am, but there's just this one thing I don't quite get that's putting a little bit of a damper on my fun. Mind clearing it up for me?"

"I'll try my best."

I cut right to the chase. "Who are you?"

This is where she says, "Why, Field Battle's mascot character of course!" I mean, technically she'd be right, but that doesn't even begin to explain things.

Raven had recognized me on an individual level and had led me through her riddles. Not only had she given me a heads-up, but she had also given me hope that I could survive in this zombie-infested world and make humanity flourish once again.

She had to have known that the key to restoring humanity was the time machine. But how? Who was pulling the strings?

"Who sent you and why?" I pressed.

"I don't have permission to answer that," she said. "The extent of my intervention is determined through careful calculations. Deviating from them might result in the entire plan failing. All I can do is ask you to trust me."

"Well, that there's a whole load of nothing. Is there someone speaking for you in real time, or are you a program?"

Raven fell silent, smiling awkwardly.

Not allowed to say, huh?

"Just tell me one thing and one thing only: this isn't a trap, right? You're my—our friend, right?"

Even I was painfully aware of just how nonsensical my own question was.

Whether Raven was our enemy or our ally, she would naturally say yes. I waited for it... but what she said next surprised me.

"I have a message for you."

"From who?"

"I'll read it." Raven averted her gaze for just a split second, then said, *"I love you, Hiroaki. Survive... for me."*

"Uh, pardon?"

What the hell?! I found myself at a complete loss for words.

"Huh?!"

Suddenly, the screen went black. A "cannot display webpage" message followed.

Did the servers go down or did the data get wiped?

I tried refreshing the site, but to no avail.

"No, no, no."

Who? What? Why?

Amid all this confusion, only one thing was certain.

"I don't need you telling me to survive, whoever you are." I sighed and turned my phone back off.



"Ready?" I asked, feeling my new weapons.

Searching through the security room located on the topmost floor had yielded a surprisingly nice piece: the Brügger & Thomet MP9.

It was a machine pistol designed for military and police use—in other words, not something you'd expect security guards in Japan to bust out. Heck, even in the U.S it would've been a little overkill due to its fully automatic firing mode.

Wouldn't have expected less from a company known for its cutting-edge technology.

I might've found it a little more concerning back in the day, but that was then and this was now.

I filled a backpack with as many 9mm rounds as it could hold and took two MP9s, one in each hand.

Also, each MP9 came equipped with a red dot sight, a flashlight, and a laser sight—an all-you-can-eat attachment buffet.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Otoha replied, clutching her trusty shovel.

I thought about handing her the spare MP9, but seeing as she wasn't familiar with guns and would likely struggle handling one, I chose to dual wield them instead.

Shiiko looked over at me. "Are we seriously going through with this?"

"Getting cold feet, are we?"

"N-No, of course not," Shiiko huffed with a cute little pout.

Not that there's any turning back now.

We were making our way down to the first floor inside the elevator, which we had accessed using Shiiko's key card.

"Three, two, one..." I counted down the floors as though counting down the seconds till we stepped into hell. "Charge!" I yelled as we rushed out of the elevator.

A zombie popped out right before us only to taste steel cutting through its neck. The head fell to the floor, followed by the body as I wheeled Shiiko along as fast as I could.

Although it was a power wheelchair, her model prioritized safety over speed, so I had to push it to get past the first floor as quickly and safely as possible. The massive battery wasn't making my job any easier.

Whether it was our voices, our scents, or something else entirely, our presence appeared to have agitated the alarming number of zombies. They all stopped moving or resting and started walking toward us simultaneously.

One, two, three, four, five... Let's just stop at five. I don't wanna count any more.

Shiiko squeezed her eyes shut, shrinking in on herself.

"Cover your ears! Otoha, sliding maneuver!"

Otoha, who was running in front of us, got into position and then unleashed all hell.

The group of zombies Otoha had bunched together were pelted with the force of fifteen 9mm rounds per second.

Since I was busy with Shiiko, most of the bullets landed somewhere around the chest area, but even so, three or four of them packed enough of a punch to throw their rotting bodies off-balance.

Otoha used the opportunity to deliver a swift leg sweep, knocking them off their feet.

"Woohoo!" I cheered. Although we had it planned out in advance, seeing everything come together like that was still satisfying.

It's like we're in sync.

"Who are you people?!" Shiiko hollered.

This show's just getting started, girlie.

Otoha rolled over to the nearest wall and stood back up, surrounded by zombies on all sides.

Shiiko gasped as the G-Wagen punched through the front entrance's reinforced glass with its bumper guard, shards flying everywhere.

"Hiroaki!" The voice came from none other than my partner, Shino.

She loaded her rifle in one swift, flowing motion, then popped the zombies one after another, taking down one for each bullet.

Although we'd left the driving up to Tetsuko, Shino had been in charge of the timing, seeing as we had played alongside one another countless times in *Field Battle*.

Yep, we're all on the same beautiful wavelength.

Its tires squealing, the G-Wagen's titanic frame spun around with remarkable ease, turning the trunk toward us.

I made sure Shino, who was back in the car again, had left the rear door open. Then, I quickly lifted Shiiko out of her wheelchair.

"Catch!" I shouted.

"What do you mean, ca—"

Shiiko flew into the car, where she was caught by Shino.

“Drive!” The G-Wagen violently whipped around, slamming the doors shut with the sheer force, and drove off, kicking up tiny glass particles in its wake.

“Hiroaki!” Otoha ran up beside me.

The reason I hadn’t hopped in was because I couldn’t leave Shiiko’s wheelchair behind.

It was essentially her legs in all but name, and she would need it to function as a full-fledged member of the group. There was also the fear that she might start feeling like a burden without it.

We had made sure to let Shino and Tetsuko know about all this beforehand using our walkie-talkie.

“You should’ve bailed while you had the chance.” I stared down the zombies with a bitter smile.

“You’re my partner,” Otoha said, sitting down in the now-empty wheelchair. I knew what she was thinking without even needing to ask.

“Off we go!” I made sure Otoha had her shovel in position and then pushed her over to the busted-open hole with all my strength.

Although Otoha was heavier than Shiiko, I was able to concentrate on the actual pushing part without having to worry about covering fire.

“Out of the way!” I yelled at the top of my lungs as I—*we*—literally carved our way forward.

Otoha spun her shovel around, laying waste to the approaching zombies. I cleaned up any survivors with my MP9s.

Bulldozing through the zombies like a well-oiled machine, we made our way outside. This sense of oneness and solidarity, felt—dare I say—fun.

“Don’t forget the farewell gift!” I took out a grenade hanging from my belt, pulled the pin and tossed it with an underhand motion.

It rolled across the ground, stopped smack-dab in the middle of the zombies, and *kablooey*!

Smoke and flames followed the explosion.

What remained of the reinforced glass turned to dust particles that shot out in all directions.

Propelled by the resulting shockwave, we rushed even faster toward the sandbank, our meet-up point, which was relatively close by.

“And now for the final stretch.”

“Roger.”

With the few remaining zombies emerging from the building in the corner of our eyes, we left North River Co. behind.

Chapter 2: Critical CrossroadZ

We settled into our seats and took to the road. Our goal was clear: reach lab one, locate the time machine, and reset the world.

"An honest-to-goodness time machine," Shino marveled from the backseat. "What are the odds?"

Shiiko was sitting between Otoha and Shino. Her wheelchair was covered with a plastic sheet and affixed to the roof rack on top of the car. Unsurprisingly, we hadn't been able to fit it inside.

At present, Shiiko was slightly hunched over, her shoulders tucked inward. She actually looked like a cute girl her age. Behind her youthful exterior, however, she was a genius scientist who'd worked on technology so advanced that it was like magic to the rest of us.

"As I told these two earlier," she said, "you can't just travel back in time all willy-nilly like you might see in manga; we're talking strictly about data transfers here. We can't undo the damage ourselves, but we *can* send out a warning message. The average person would probably brush it off as complete nonsense, but a North River Co. employee should respond accordingly."

"I'm not too familiar with the subject matter at hand," said Tetsuko, manning the wheel, "but wouldn't that result in us changing the past?"

"It would."

"Then what happens to the present?"

"I... don't know," Shiiko replied. "I can see us returning to our old lives as though nothing had ever happened. Then again, even if we do end up succeeding, there's no guarantee that the zombie apocalypse gets nipped in the bud. Experiments have shown that all paths converge into a single, predetermined outcome."

"Then what's the point of taking any action at all?"

"The issue here is that we immediately run headfirst into what's known as the grandfather paradox. By altering the past we remove the need for it to be altered in the present, resulting in a contradiction. Thus, even in the best-case scenario, averting the zombie apocalypse altogether is highly unlikely. That being said, there might just be a fine line where the present could potentially change for the better without causing a paradox. More specifically, erm, the zombies disappearing the exact moment we get the message off... or something along those lines." Shiiko clearly didn't feel comfortable making definitive predictions, judging from her uncertain tone of voice.

In short, she seemed to think that once the connection between the zombies and the past had been severed, they'd return to being lifeless corpses.

"Then the dead are going to stay that way... for good," Shino muttered, her eyes fixed on the case resting at her feet.

"In all likelihood," Shiiko replied, her gaze also downcast. "Though that might not necessarily hold true... in some unobservable parallel world, that is. The universe continually splits apart, resolving every possible quantum outcome across myriad worlds, if we go by the many-worlds interpretation. Our world will likely remain unchanged, however."

"So, to dumb that all down for my gamer brain, we won't have to worry about our memories of the apocalypse disappearing or whatever, but the zombies will probably just poof out of existence?"

"Something like that. We may even be able to restore society, given enough time and effort."

"Hats off to all the brave men and women carrying the great burden that is our collective future."

"You say that while failing to recognize that we might be the only ones left, in which case, the burden is ours to carry."

"I, well, I guess so?"

Restoring society sounds nice and all, but what would it entail? Would we go around looking for other survivors, assuming there are any, or would we first have to shut down all the nuclear reactors across the country? All... however many of them? Us nobodies?

"Wait a moment..." Shino tilted her head in consideration. "Wouldn't that mean we'd have to make like a postapocalyptic Adam and Eve?" Her cheeks flushed a deep pink at the thought.

Adam and Eve? She can't possibly mean what I think she means, right?

"Don't know what you mean by 'we.' There's only four possible combinations," Shiiko said flatly.

"Four, you say?"

"There are four females and one male." Shiiko pointed at each of us in turn, ending with me. "Do the math."

I stand corrected.

"What're you two babbling about, if you don't mind me asking?"

"We're talking about who will be your bride, of course," Shino murmured, averting her gaze.

"Take your pick," Shiiko said, holding up four fingers.

"Like hell I will!"

Tetsuko had a sardonic grin on her face, Shino was staring at the ground with a flushed face, and Otoha... well, it was business as usual for her.

After a few moments of this awkward vibe, Shino said, "Actually, Shiiko, I think it'd be best if we removed you from the list."

"Why?"

"According to Japanese law, you're not eligible for marriage yet."

"Laws mean nothing without a functioning government to impose them."

"F-Fair point."

"Also, consider the fact that Hiroaki said, and I quote, 'You're mine now. I own you.'" Shiiko clearly wasn't afraid to rub salt in the wounds. "That's a proposal if I've ever heard one."

"Why, I never!"

Don't take it to heart, Shino. Like, really. Please don't.

"N-Not that I would want to, but, erm, if worst comes to worst..." Now Shiiko was the one getting flustered.

Do I get a say in any of this?!

"Your conclusion doesn't follow your premises," Otoha interjected, holding up her index finger. "Marriage *is* a legal construct. In terms of efficiency, we'd have to look toward polygamy, not monogamy."

An awkward silence followed. The car's engine hummed in the background.

"I suppose greater genetic variety *is* essential if we're looking to repopulate the planet," Shiiko groaned, crossing her arms. "But a harem, really? How deplorable."

"Pervert."

"For shame."

All three girls took turns belittling me.

Oh, so I'm the one at fault here. I see.

"Teehee. Hiroaki is quite the lady-killer."

Not you too, Tetsuko! Stop laughing!

And just like that, I was now officially a harem-loving deviant, despite the fact that I'd done nothing wrong. Just between you and me, I felt like fading out of existence.



Worn out by the conversation, I took the opportunity to reflect on our actual situation. A time machine, huh? Will it save the world? Will it undo what has been done? I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that it's already given us hope.

Those three are having the time of their lives, going on and on about... something. Even Tetsuko's smiling.

Something dawned on me at that moment.

Just the tiniest glimmer of hope, no matter how dim or seemingly out of reach, draws us toward it like bees to a flower. We're always seeking that nourishment for the soul.



Out in the middle of nowhere, nestled among mountains and shrouded in forest, it stood: North River Co.'s Japanese lab number one.

Wide and short in stature, the mountainside building was a thirty-something-minute trip away from the nearest public road, making it practically invisible to passersby. Stumbling upon it by chance would've been no easy feat.

It appeared to have been home to many employees, judging from the sheer number of walkers roaming the area. Some donned white coats, while others wore blue uniforms. They were male and female, both young and old.

The miasmic stench of rotting flesh hanging in the air was a sign that they had turned zombie in the very initial stages.

With every step, swarms of flies enveloping their bodies like a wriggly, charcoal-black skin flew off and back on again, beginning the cycle anew.

It made for a deeply repulsive sight.

"Multiple threats detected. Forty or so, all likely former employees."

Out in the distance, shadowy figures obscured by the veil of nightfall were observing the building and the walkers that roamed its premises.

Their bulky frames were covered in camo, multipurpose vests, and knee and elbow protectors. Guns were slung over their shoulders. At first glance, they could've been taken for members of the military.

However, they were clearly not associated with the JSDF, going by their equipment. Their firearm of choice was the Heckler & Koch UMP, a submachine gun that used .45 ACP cartridges.

The UMP had been designed for special forces, meaning that you wouldn't have seen it out on the battlefield; rather, the gun was intended for use in counterterrorist or sabotage operations.

Instead of opting for supersonic 9mm Parabellum cartridges, the golden standard for submachine guns, this weapon was fitted with higher-caliber but subsonic .45 ACP because of its insta-kill potential and suppressor-friendly properties.

A suitable choice for an all-out battle.

Yes, these individuals were out for zombie blood, and their gear reflected that.

Case in point: not only were their joints protected by reinforced plastic protectors, but so were their hands, feet, and necks—parts that a zombie could easily get to.

“Our prize sleeps at the bottom of this facility,” the presumed squad captain said into the communicator affixed to his chest. “Our goal is to find and secure it. Shoot down every zombie in sight.”

His men nodded without saying a word.

Pssh-pssh-pssh went the UMPs in unison, a sound so dull that it barely even qualified as a gunshot.

Gunfire rained upon the zombies wandering around the facility.

Normally, they would’ve been able to react to the attack, but due to the suppressors, and the fact that the source was a good distance away, they had been caught completely unawares.

Most of them quickly fell to the ground, bullet-shaped holes adorning the backs of their skulls.

“South-side entrance, clear!”

“East gate, clear!”

“North gate, clear!”

The squad captain popped out of the woods and rushed straight toward the front entrance.

Along the way, a few stragglers tried getting the drop on him, but he put a bullet in every single one of their heads and made it to the door unscathed.

“Threat neutralized. Shifting to phase two.”

He pulled a key card out of his pocket and placed it against the electronic scanning device on the wall. He had made sure to pack explosives just in case plan A backfired, but the shutters started rolling up without a hitch.

All according to plan, he thought to himself, but he had no idea what was about to come.

“Bravo, Charlie? Report back immediately.” The units in charge of the east and north gates did not respond. Even more worryingly, his own unit was nowhere to be found.

“Hey!”

No sooner than the word left his mouth did a blurry flash of light flicker in the dark, catching his attention.

A muzzle flash. Although it couldn’t really be seen during the day, it was just barely visible at night, even with the silencer equipped.

And then... a bloodcurdling scream rang out in the distance.

“What the hell’s going on out there?!” the captain yelled into the communicator.

Miraculously, one of his men replied, screaming, *“Alpha One reporting in! The zombie, it’s—oh God... s-stay back! Stay baaack!”* The piercing shriek that followed echoed louder than the gunfire.

Then came an explosion.

"You imbeciles!" the captain exclaimed as he watched the flames rise.

Someone must've gotten the drop on them, and in their confusion, they had used the explosives meant for plan B. This did not bode well, as the explosion could've attracted zombies out on the public roads.

It was now a race against time. Do or die.

He knew that securing the prize was all but impossible, so he settled on simply pinpointing its location as he stepped into the building.

"What the—?!" Motivated by some primal instinct, he whipped his head around.

At that exact moment, something seemed to materialize behind him. Such an astounding feat of dexterity had been performed by none other than what appeared to be a... zombie.

Its flesh was so rotten, so decayed, that the only identifiably humanlike features were its general body shape and red, glowing eyes.

What are you?!

Many animals, including dogs and cats, had a layer of specialized tissue, known as tapetum, just behind their retinas. Tapetum gave light a second chance to be absorbed by the animals' eyes and caused them to shine in the dark.

Humans, however, weren't lucky enough to have this tissue. Thus, these glorified human corpses known as zombies shouldn't have had it either.

Smacking his lips, the captain unloaded his UMP. Ten rounds shot out in the span of a single second, most of which landed in the upper body region. They weren't just any rounds, oh no; they were high-caliber soft-point rounds.

Its head burst into pieces, and then it unceremoniously collapsed to the ground.

"Huh?"

At least, that was what was supposed to happen.

Instead, the zombie stood its ground, completely unfazed.

The bullets had most definitely landed. He even saw loose chunks of flesh flying off of the zombie's body. Yet there it stood.

"Wh-Why isn't it working?!"

He unloaded the rest of the magazine. Not only did it remain standing, but it began stepping toward him, as though it had noticed his magazine was empty.

The captain reached for a backup magazine in his multipurpose vest, but the zombie wouldn't allow him the chance to fire again.

"Grk!"

Closing the distance in an instant, the creature seized his hand.

It's that fast?! No way!

His hand was crushed, along with the backup magazine in it. Blood and bullets spilled onto the floor.

"AaaAahHh!" The man let out a guttural scream as the zombie chewed through his protection and into his flesh.



North River Co.'s labs were scattered all across the country, from Okinawa to Hokkaido.

The fact that lab one was situated in Honshu of all places really made me feel like we'd lucked out. Making the trip to Kyushu or Shikoku or even Hokkaido wouldn't have been the *worst* thing ever, assuming all the bridges and the tunnels were intact, but I shuddered to even think about Okinawa.

We were on the road pretty much day and night, stopping only to occasionally siphon gas from abandoned cars or to switch drivers.

"Wow, you actually *can* do it," said Otoha, who was currently riding shotgun.

"Told you, didn't I?" I replied.

The stretches of dark road, illuminated only by the occasional street light, continued on and on and on. Since there was no oncoming traffic to speak of, I had switched on the high beams. There was something surreal about the bright lights seamlessly cutting through the dark.

"I've had practice in the virtual realm, but it's my first time handling the real thing, so don't expect too much."

"I never did."

"Gee, thanks."

Tetsuko, Shino, and Shiiko were in the back catching some Zs.

"You'd better get used to it; you never know what could happen," Tetsuko had said, and just like that, my journey to driving mastery had begun. Well, it was kind of a short and uneventful one, seeing as we just had to head straight all the way to the lab.

Funnily enough, all the stray zombies had seemingly vanished from the road the moment I'd gotten behind the wheel.

All I had to do was drive in a straight line and nothing else... nothing at all.

Still, that would've been mind-numbingly boring, not to mention sleep-inducing, so I'd decided to engage in some quality conversation with Otoha instead. "You know, it's almost like we're on a nighttime drive."

I immediately regretted saying it.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. What even was that, a half-baked pickup line?!

"Aren't we?" Otoha tilted her head.

"Well... yes."

Okay, yes, we are literally on a nighttime drive, but I meant it in more of a romantic excursion sort of way. You know what, I should probably just be glad she didn't catch on and pretend this never happened.

Otoha was as dense as ever, although it was cute in its own way.

"Hope is a nice thing, isn't it?"

Even a microscopic amount is preferable to crawling around in the dark, blind to everything around you.

"I guess." Otoha's tone came off as unusually pensive, though it was so subtle only I would've been able to tell.

"Feeling a little down?"

"I'm always this way," Otoha said, staring off into the night. "Always have been."

The last bit felt important somehow.

This is Otoha, who's always this way. Otoha, who's always been this way. Otoha, the emotionally stunted zombie aficionado labeled as a wackjob by everyone around her. Otoha, who had survived precisely because of that. Otoha, who's my partner and my lifesaver.

Otoha, who... might not want things to change.

"Do you like it better this way?" I asked as casually as I could.

This might be a stretch, but what if Otoha feels like this is what her entire life has led up to? That this is where she truly belongs? The potential ramifications of time travel are a toss-up at the moment, but what if Otoha ends up losing her place in the world? Is she gonna lock herself away in her room and watch zombie flicks and make weapons all day long?

"Do you not feel like saving the world?"

"You could say that," Otoha said matter-of-factly.

Actually, I don't think I know much at all about Otoha's past. I mean, she told me a little about her family once, but that's about it.

I have no idea where she lived, what school she went to, anything about her friends or lack thereof, her other hobbies, her favorite food, her favorite animal... I know nothing about her normal, everyday life.

"Keep your eyes on the road."

"I am, see? See?" Although my eyes were on the road, my attention had shifted to Otoha.

She could be oddly perceptive at times. The girl never ceased to amaze me.

Then again, it's not like I'm dying to talk about my past either, seeing as it mostly consisted of me rotting away in my room grinding away at FPS games.

I wholeheartedly enjoyed it, but at the same time, I'm willing to recognize that society at large had a less than favorable outlook on my hobbies and general lifestyle.

Diehard FPS nerds in particular seemed to attract a lot of ire. The only ones who understood us were our own kind; everyone else just wrote us off as war fetishists or closet serial killers.

Maybe there's a part of me that doesn't want things to change either. A part of me feels fulfilled, like I'm actually living life.

"Oh, and one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Don't you even think about turning on us in the end."

Otoha didn't play dumb. She just quietly stared off into the distance. Resting her arm on the door, she set her chin in her hand and let out a small sigh.

I had never seen her express emotion this openly before.



"This world is my own personalized utopia, in a sense."

"Mmm."

"Here, no one treats me like I'm missing a few screws. On the contrary, people seem to respect my opinion—you, Shino, Uemura, and Shiiko, too. It's been such a blast. Life finally feels worth living." Although Otoha's delivery was as flat as ever, I knew the words came straight from the heart, and they hit a little too close to home. "But all things come and go."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's not commonly touched upon in zombie media, but zombies, regardless of their origins, will inevitably rot away into nothing. So long as their numbers grow faster than human reproduction rates, they'll go extinct sooner or later. There's no future for this world. It's doomed either way."

"Makes sense."

How could I forget to ask myself that one extremely fundamental question: what is a zombie? According to Otoha, there are all kinds of real-life examples of one living thing taking over another.

For example, there's a worm that infects the mind and body of a snail, its intermediary host, so that it can force the snail to crawl out in the open and get eaten by a bird, which is its definitive host. Then, the worm breeds in the bird's guts, thereby propagating its species. The host snail can't tolerate heat and prefers venturing out at night, but the worm sends it out into the daylight and makes the eyestalks pulsate to attract birds.

It's a perfectly understandable parasitic strategy honed through the process of evolution.

However, if we assume that a virus is to blame for the zombie outbreak, it's an incredibly inefficient strategy in terms of long-term survival. With its abnormal infection rate, it's bound to run out of host bodies eventually, bringing about its own eventual demise.

How would such an absurd virus even come to be in the first place? Or maybe it's not a virus, but rather some kind of cancer cell?

Cancer cells, much like parasites, kill themselves and the host, but there's an important distinction to be made between the two: the former isn't a result of a parasitic strategy developing over time. Cancer is simply a gene mutation causing unchecked cell growth. In other words, cancer is not contagious; even I know as much.

Man, I really don't get it. Why did zombies appear when they did, and how did they spread at such ludicrous speeds? Why is it that these terrifying monsters are able to bring an end to humanity and yet they can't even survive themselves?

Where's the logic? Is there even any?

"In conclusion," Otoha said, "zombies are better off on the big screen, where they belong."

"Took you long enough."

Wait, when did she have time to arrive at that conclusion?

"Sometimes a hobby should stay a hobby."

Hear it all the time.

"Can't expect any new zombie movies to come out at this rate either."

"Indeed."

In a way, we're kind of living in our own zombie flick. There's just no end credits in sight.

"So, Otoha, I've been meaning to ask you something for the longest time now. How did you get into zombies in the first place?"

So into it, in fact, that even her family kept their distance.

"What's it to you?" she asked sharply.

"I just want to get to know you a little better, that's all."

People have their own reasons for liking things, and sometimes they just don't feel like talking about it. Otoha's no exception. She must've been through her fair share of difficult experiences, so maybe forcing her to cough them back up wouldn't be very kind of me. But, I mean, we're partners.

Partners talk to each other, make sure they're okay... and if not, they lend a helping hand. Helping Otoha helps me as much as it does her.

"It's not like you just woke up one day with the need to eat, sleep, and breathe zombies, yeah? If you don't wanna talk about it, I'm cool with that, though."

Otoha stayed silent, her face still turned toward the dark. She kept the act up for a solid three minutes before finally giving in to boredom. "The thing I find fascinating about zombies is that they're dead, but not really."

"Oh?"

"Just like I used to be."

Used to be a... zombie? What else could she mean by that?

"I used to be... indifferent to life, let's say."

"I can see that."

Just look at how little she cares about anything that doesn't involve zombies.

"My dad took me to see my first ever movie: a zombie movie, of course. It left a lasting impression on me."

"Quite the character, huh?"

For most people, that kind of thing would've happened around kindergarten or maybe early elementary school. What kind of dad takes his prepubescent daughter to a zombie movie?

"It was during the holidays, so virtually every other film was sold out. We didn't have much of a choice."

"I see."

"One of the characters was this little girl who was indifferent to life, much like me. She'd constantly grumble about how life was meaningless, how she didn't care about dying, something to that effect. That all changed when she ran into a zombie. After that, her lust for life was formidable."

"Sounds about right."

"But in the end, she turned anyway."

"I should've known."

The scriptwriter clearly wasn't pulling any punches.

"Normally, you die and that's the end of it, but she was cursed to roam the streets as the very thing she hated most: a zombie." Otoha's face was riddled with grief and melancholy. "I realized that being dead but not really is a horrifying thing. That's when it hit me. Wouldn't being alive but not really be just as scary, if not even more so?"

Living life—if you can even call it that—when you're dead inside doesn't sound the least bit fulfilling, and an unfulfilling life inevitably leads to regret in the grave. How ironic that the ones who are so quick to reject life lust for it more than anyone else.

"I thought, 'Am I really any different from a zombie?'"

"Deep," I said half-jokingly to lighten the mood a little. "Gaining perspective from a zombie movie... Well, I'll be."

Classic Otoha, I thought to myself, completely convinced there was nowhere for the conversation to go from there.

"Have you heard of Cotard's delusion?" Otoha asked, seemingly unfazed.

"Uh, say what?"

"It's a rare condition that makes you believe you're dead."

"That's an actual thing?"

The more you know.

"In my case, it might not necessarily be Cotard's per se, but I've always felt like I don't really exist. Not quite dead yet not quite alive, like I'm drifting between the two extremes."

"Wow."

"Which is why," Otoha said, side-eyeing me, "that one line you delivered to Shino as you tried convincing her to shoot her dad made me feel... happy."

"How so?"

"I realized that I'd found someone who thinks like I do."

"What do mean by—oh, yeah, I see."

"The man's suffered enough. Let's put an end to his misery." She probably means this one.

"Wait... you heard all that?!"

Wasn't I whispering in Shino's ear? How did she pick that up?

I hadn't been trying to get some deep point across; it was just a pep talk. Still, I decided to keep that little detail to myself.

"It's either life or death, one or the other; skirting the line will make everyone involved miserable. The dead deserve their rest, and the living deserve to live their lives to the fullest. That's my guiding philosophy, shaped entirely by my very own bible—zombie movies."

"Zombie movies, the ultimate moral compass." Despite my sarcasm, I pretty much agreed with her.

"I want past me to know what it feels like to be whole."

"Same here, actually."

"Which is why I want to reset the world."

Although we'd always pretended to engage in our hobbies without a single care in the world, there was this lingering sense of inadequacy and guilt that came with being different from other people. *Normal* people.

We had never attempted to argue or persuade anyone; instead, we had just retreated back into our little bubbles, telling ourselves that they were different from us, that they wouldn't understand.

And now here we were, out on a mission to save the world using the skills we'd built up all thanks to said hobbies.

If I'd known how things were gonna turn out, I would've gone up to my bullies and said, "Yeah, I'm into VRFPS games, so what?" or "Quit being so close-minded and give it a fair try. You never know." I'm getting giddy just thinking about it.

"I think we're similar in that regard. As a diehard VRFPS enthusiast, I received my fair share of 'witty' remarks. 'You think war is fun?' and that kind of stuff. But look at me now."

Here I am, alive and kickin'.

"Maybe you're not the only one everyone should look out for."

I might be the one who turns on you at the very end.

"Hey, Hiroaki," Otoha said gently, her tone sympathetic, "don't do anything stupid."

"Says you," I shot back with a wry smile.



Thirty minutes had passed since we'd turned onto a private road.

Upon making it past a dense cluster of trees, we were immediately greeted by a chain-link fence adorned with an "Authorized Personnel Only" sign and a gray mountainside building.

"Hey, Shiiko..."

According to Shiiko, North River Co., being a PFIC engaging in eyebrow-raising research, had preferred to build its labs in rural areas away from civilization. Even lab four, where Shiiko worked, was no exception.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"You guessed it. The front entrance is right ahead," Shiiko said, pointing.

"It appears we may have company," Tetsuko added, loading up the Mossberg.

"Quite possibly."

At the end of the fence was what appeared to be a gate. But this wasn't just any gate; it was the kind of gate that could open and close automatically with a security booth beside it, where a security guard would rush out at the first sign of danger. The actual doors were just like the ones you might find in front of a school. They were made with sturdy-looking steel.

Thing is, not only were they wide open, but the security booth's walls were peppered with bullet holes.

Someone must've tried raiding the place. But who, and to what end?

"Look over there, Hiroaki."

With the space illuminated by our headlights, I could see a group of men clad in camo and multipurpose vests. "Huh. Those look awfully familiar."

Is that AOR-2? No, it's green MARPAT.

That was woodland, multi-scale digital camo used by the U.S. Marine Corps.

"I could understand JSDF, but what business could the Marines have had here?"

Then again, there's civilian clothing along with the camo, so it's hard to say if they're really the Marines. Heck, even I owned some. Either way, could they be the "company" Tetsuko was talking about?

"We can think after we're done." Otoha grabbed her trusty shovel and reached for the door handle.

I hastily stopped her in her tracks. "Are you crazy?! They're armed!"

They're not just armed; they're armed with H&K UMPs! With silencers, too! They must be the Marines. If not, they definitely belong to some kind of special forces.

"We'll be fine."

"Which part of 'they're armed' did you not understand?!"

"Look closer. They're all zombies."

"I know, but still!"

Remember how Shino's dad almost shot me? Because I certainly do!

"They're only repeating past behavioral patterns."

Yes, Otoha, her dad could've been simply repeating past behavioral patterns... but what if he wasn't? Actually, even if that is the case, submachine guns can disperse bullets in a large area, and they're hella dangerous. You never know when they might ricochet back at you.

"Besides, it's not like zombies are capable of complex actions like firing a gu—"

Pssh-pssh-pssh. The dull sound of suppressed gunfire reached our ears as all the first-floor windows were turned into dust.

"You were saying?"

"Unintentional discharges happen sometimes. It's nothing to worry about."

"There's plenty to worry about!" I hissed, resisting the urge to shout.

Then again, we can't really sit around for much longer.

"Shiiko, keep your head down until we say otherwise," I said, turning to face her. She was sitting in her wheelchair next to the G-Wagen.

"Will do." Shiiko nodded without giving me lip, likely sensing the urgency in my voice.

"Shino, you watch the car. Stay inside so you can close the doors in case something happens. Only shoot at the last possible moment because gunfire'll attract zombies."

"Copy that." Shino was in full Zino mode.

"Otoha, you and I will lead the charge. Uemura, watch our backs."

"Roger."

"As you wish."

Once everyone had their orders, Otoha and I darted off in separate directions.

Could they be security guards? I mean, even the ones over at lab four were packing submachine guns, and those are obviously illegal in Japan.

It would make sense, given that they were working on a freakin' time machine. That thing could be used for great good in the right hands... but it could also be used for great evil in the wrong ones.

Say, for whatever reason, you wanted Imperial Japan to win World War II. All you'd have to do is send back the newest weapon schematics, the enemy's positions, or even the latest military tactics, and the rest would take care of itself.

I deployed the MP9's folding stock, shouldered it as I placed my left hand on the foregrip, and fired.

The 9mm Parabellums left the barrel with a subdued *pssh*, making solid contact with the zombies' upper bodies.

To compensate for recoil, I aimed at their chests and, wouldn't you know it, the trajectory started steadily moving upward. By the fourth shot, one of the zombies had a nice hole in the back of its skull.

Who's the best?!

I turned back to see Tetsuko, the Mossberg hanging from her back, one-shotting zombies with the other MP9.

Oh. She's the best...

They say shooting a gun is like riding a bike or swimming; you never forget how. Anyway, I should probably take a page out of Tetsuko's book and try my best to one-shot 'em to conserve ammo, since we've got a limited supply.

Suddenly, I heard Otoha say, "Hiroaki, cover me." I whipped my head around to see her charging headfirst into the fray with her shovel aloft.

"Why, you little...!"

I taught you how to use that MP9 for a reason, you know! I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs.

Otoha drew a quick breath, got low to the ground, and took off. As she passed by a zombie, she did a half spin with her left foot and topped it off with a diagonal slash.

"Whoa."

The shovel severed the zombie's head from its body like a well-tempered blade. Now headless, the zombie took a few steps forward before collapsing.

"Learned it by watching zombie movies, my ass."

Otoha's one-on-one fighting capabilities were as remarkable as ever, especially for her size.

First to make the cut makes it a cut above the rest. At least, that's how it goes in kendo. Obviously, she'd be facing off against a fellow kendo

practitioner in a promotional examination, but she'd probably still wipe the floor with your average shodan.

After all, she's mowed down countless zombies in multiple life-or-death encounters. She knows the exact angles and velocity needed to neutralize the zombie like the back of her hand. Practice makes perfect, as they say.

Tetsuko and I downed three zombies each while Otoha decapitated two. As an added precaution, she also decapitated the other six.

This all took place in under one minute.

"Well done."

"I'll ask again: who *are* you people?" muttered a bewildered Shiiko. Tetsuko had just wheeled her onto the scene alongside Shino, who was clutching the M700.

"Hiroaki, the guns appear to be in working order," Tetsuko said, beating me to the punch. "Should we keep them?" Meanwhile, her hands had a mind of their own as they released the magazine, inspected it, ejected the chambered round, and checked it for jamming all at the same time.

Do I even need to say anything at this point?

"The .45 ACPs alone make it more effective against... zombies."

I then had an epiphany.

9mm Parabellum cartridges were the most widely used submachine gun cartridge nowadays—at least, they had been. These UMPs were an exception in that SOCOM, finding 9mms lacking in stopping power, had officially purchased a small number of them loaded with .45 ACPs. In other words, they were perfect for incapacitating targets in a single shot due to their sheer power.

That I could maybe chalk up to coincidence, but upon further inspection, the zombies also had reinforced plastic protectors around their hands, feet, and necks.

Anti-zombie measures... These people came here knowing how to exploit a zombie's biology or whatever you wanna call it.

"What would the Americans be doing here? I don't recall there being a military base nearby." Shino cocked her head to one side.

Aside from dressing like the Marines, they also looked the part; their faces had "Westerner" written all over them.

Their equipment was unlike that of Japanese forces, but they were also too advanced to have fallen into the yakuza's hands.

This left us with only one possible conclusion.

"Guess the time machine, or something like it, is real after all."

It wasn't that I didn't trust Shiiko. It was just that a time machine wasn't one of those things you could just assume existed without any evidence. But the fact that the Marines, or someone with Marine-level equipment, had come here was enough to change my mind.

And then there's Raven. She seemed to know everything. Could she possibly be...?

"Let's hurry," I said quickly.

Trotting onward, the three of us arrived at the front entrance, followed by Tetsuko, who was wheeling Shiiko along.

In front of us stood a double-leaf iron door, and beside it was a small electronic device with a keypad and a slit.

That there's our way in.

"Think we can open it?" I asked Shiiko.

"Hold on a second... Here, just use this." I scanned the key card, then punched in the sixteen-digit passcode Shiiko gave me.

Then, we heard a sound.

"There we go."

The doors swung open.

I instinctively got into battle mode just in case zombies came flooding out... but there was nothing, not a single soul.

"One step closer to victory."

"What are we waiting for? Let's get going," Shino said with a smile on her face.

"Hold on," I said. "Something wrong, Otoha?" Something about her seemed off. I could almost feel the tension building up inside her as she readied for a fight. "Otoha?" Silence. "Don't do it, girl."

Our earlier conversation crossed my mind.

Otoha said she wouldn't betray us, and she's not the kind to go back on her word this late in the game. I'm almost completely sure of it.

Otoha shook her head. "Don't let your guard down. Those zombies? They didn't reek."

"Now that you mention it..."

Almost every zombie we'd come across had put out this gut-wrenchingly awful stench, but the guys from earlier hadn't smelled at all. I was so used to the odor that I hadn't even noticed.

"What about it?" Shino asked.

"They died recently, they had weapons, they had ammo, and they even wore anti-zombie protection."

"Oh." Shino had finally caught on.

Yup, they died very recently, possibly just a few hours ago.

"Why are they dead? They had weapons; they could've defended themselves."

The weapons weren't broken either, nor had they run out of ammo. They'd even been wearing anti-zombie protection, but they'd still lost.

Maybe one of them had survived, but even if they had, they would've probably run off by now. Or would they?

"Let's just get this over with." I violently shook my head to drive the bad thoughts away. "We can't let our guard down, but we can't just kick back here either. That'd be even more dangerous."

"I agree," Shiiko said.

"So do I." Once Otoha nodded, we bunched up together and stepped into the lab.

We emerged in the lobby, which was identical to the one in lab four—large as a football field, supported by pillars, and reception desk nowhere in sight.

Must've seen all kinds of use throughout the years.

Farther down was a hallway leading to the elevators.

"Any idea how we get to this Keith guy?"

Assuming, of course, this isn't just one big leg-pull courtesy of the health-monitoring system.

"There should be a security terminal on the second floor—"

"I've been expecting you, Shiiko." A voice echoed throughout the lobby. We all braced ourselves for the worst... all but Shiiko.

"Keith? Keith, is that you?!" she called out, a sparkle in her eyes.

"You had me worried sick, you little rascal."

"Right back at you!" Shiiko yelled. "Why didn't you call?! Why didn't you answer any of our... our..." She trailed off as her voice began to quiver.

"Believe me, I tried, but I couldn't get through; communications were jammed. My apologies," Keith explained in a calm, collected manner.

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm just glad you're okay." Shiiko surveyed the lobby, wiping tears from her eyes.

The lobby's rigged with cameras; he must be watching us.

"Keith, we're—"

"After the prototype time machine?" Keith finished for her. "To avert the zombie apocalypse by sending a message into the past, I presume? Given your excellent problem-solving skills."

"Yes, and, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't the latest reports say that the data transfer limits are fairly lenient?"

"That they are."

Never heard this guy talk before, but there's something about the glee in his voice, the joy with which he speaks that's a tad... off-putting. Not to mention incredibly out of place.

Shiiko doesn't seem to care one bit, though. Maybe I've just got the wrong impression.

"We need to get to that time machine," Shiiko pleaded. "Where is it? Is it here?"

"Alright, alright. I'll help you find it." As he spoke, a door at the end of the elevator hall opened.

Is that a passage?

The lights lit up in turns, giving off the illusion of an incrementally growing tunnel, expanding ever deeper.

It's long. Like, really long. This building rests on the mountainside, so it should lead into the basement, right?

"You're the best, Keith." Shiiko sped off, unable to contain her excitement. "Over here, guys!"

I ran up in front of her, nodding to Shino and Tetsuko. Without so much as a word, they positioned themselves on either side of Shiiko.

Otoha ran up beside me. No verbal or nonverbal communication was required.

She and I made up the front guard. Shino and Tetsuko, tasked with protecting our king—scratch that, queen—piece a.k.a. Shiiko, made up the rear guard. Keeping Shiiko safe was our top priority.

Thus, we made our way down the passage slowly and carefully.

After walking about a hundred meters, we stepped into a dome-shaped room roughly the size of two tennis courts. It was smaller than the lobby, but its ceiling was much higher.

Smack-dab in the middle sat a blocky contraption, a plethora of wires piercing it from every side.

It's like a square head being held up by octopus or jellyfish tentacles.

On a small table beside it was a single laptop—presumably the activation terminal.

That was all there was to the room.

Is this the time machine?

“Go to ‘H. G. Wells,’ then ‘Instruction Manual,’ and you should be good to go,” came Keith’s voice.

“Don’t mind if I do!” Shiiko approached the laptop, scanned her key card, and began rapidly typing away at the keyboard.

The laptop display appeared on the wall; there was probably a hidden projector somewhere. An endless string of letters and numbers could be seen running across at incomprehensibly high speeds.

“I was expecting a DeLorean.” Otoha’s abrupt remark brought a wry smile to my face.

Personally, I half expected us to find a police box here or something. But hey, it is what it is.

“Say, Hiroaki,” Shino said with a suspicious look on her face, “don’t you find it a bit odd how Keith’s not here? Didn’t he say he was ‘worried sick’ about Shiiko earlier?”

We could hear him, but we couldn’t see him.

He could’ve at least projected an image of himself or something to put Shiiko’s mind at ease. He can’t possibly be that dense.

“Keith Wayne, was it? I need to ask you something.”

“Go ahead,” he replied casually.

“Why don’t you show yourself?”

“For what reason?”

“Most people don’t really need a reason to see the person they care so deeply about, especially not after all this time.”

“That is true for *most* people, certainly.”

His chipper attitude is seriously weirding me out. Is this guy really Keith Wayne?

“No, no, no!” Shiiko was practically screaming. “Why? This can’t be happening!”

“What’s going on?”

"The time machine! It's... It's not working!" Shiiko shouted, whipping her head back to me. "I can't get it to start, let alone change the past, when one of the parts is missing!"

I surveyed the ceiling, peering into every single one of the cameras—Keith's watchful eyes.

"Why, Keith? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Beats me," came his nonchalant reply.

There's no doubt about it: he's enjoying this. He's watching Shiiko on the verge of a breakdown, and he's relishing it.

"Hiroaki, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Same here."

We nodded to each other and began searching the area.

There's no way it ends here. There's gotta be a final boss; the setup calls for it.

At that moment, the door opposite the one we'd entered opened, and something emerged from the darkness.

"Zombie!" Shiiko screamed.

Although it looked vaguely human, its skin had completely rotted away, making it impossible to tell its color or facial features for that matter.

It must've been one hulking man or woman back in the day because it was huge—easily over two meters tall with abnormally wide shoulders.

Even more curiously, it held a thick, steel pipe in one of its hands.

Is that a... weapon?!

"You really picked the wrong time!"

Of course we weren't going to just sit back and watch. Tetsuko and I pulled out our UMPs and fired one shot each to see what would happen. We also had to factor in our location.

Both .45 ACP rounds, known for their immense stopping power despite low initial velocity, were on a direct collision with its cranium.

"Huh?!" I blurted.

The shrill sound of ricocheting bullets filled the room. Needless to say, our shots hit the wall without so much as grazing its head.

We missed? At this range, both of us? Not possible.

This left us with only one other alternative: this titan of a zombie had dodged our bullets.

If that wasn't crazy enough, it also switched to hanmi, a classic aikido stance which involves standing with your feet perpendicular to each other.

It seemed like a boxer ready to throw down... This *zombie*, which should've only known how to stumble forward one rotting foot at a time.

"What the hell?!" Tetsuko and I were frozen in place. Otoha, on the other hand, charged straight in.

"What're you doing?!" I shouted.

"No worries. Sprinters are in all the latest zombie media," Otoha said, readying her shovel.

This isn't one of your movies! This is real life!

"Drop it! The zombie, it's—"

Otoha, of course, swung her shovel without letting me finish. As always, she aimed for the head—no, the neck.

As Otoha took the last step, she did a half spin and brought the shovel down, applying the full force of her body. The shovel sliced through the zombie's neck like a well-tempered sword... or at least, it was supposed to.

The harsh sound of clashing metal echoed across the room.

Like a well-trained knight locked in a glorious battle, the zombie had thrown up its steel pipe to block Otoha's attack. What followed was unlike anything we had seen before.

It twirled the pipe around, ripping Otoha's trusty shovel right out of her hands.

It's not mimicking past behavioral patterns; it's reacting to her as though it has a mind of its own!

"Oh no! Otoha!" Shino yelled, her voice filled with dread.

Otoha quickly ducked down, avoiding the hand reaching out to grab her. The deafening roar of the M700 followed immediately after. I watched as the big-game hunting round—leagues above your average pistol rounds in terms of stopping power—pierced right through the center of its chest.

Shino had chosen to avoid the head so it couldn't dodge again, instead aiming for the spinal cord.

Excellent decision-making on her part... except for the fact that the zombie shook it off like it was nothing.

How?! To exert conscious control over its body, the spinal cord has to be intact. This thing not only took the hit, but it barely even reacted! Was her aim off? No, maybe this has something to do with the intricacies of the human body.

A bullet can enter the body in a straight line, but it'll get caught up in tissue and exit at a different angle. So maybe the bullet did pierce the zombie's chest, but its trajectory got thrown off just enough to miss the spinal cord? In that case, you'd at least expect it to penetrate the body, but it didn't. A soft point bullet meant for hunting big game didn't penetrate the body at this range?

"Otoha, something's not right here. Fall back!"

Knowing that standing would mean her immediate death, Otoha did the smart thing and rolled away to put distance between herself and the zombie.

It tried chasing after her, only to be served hot lead courtesy of Tetsuko's M500.

The zombie faltered for just a split second, which was all we needed.

"Over here!"

"Hiroaki, Otoha, over here!" Shino turned the wheelchair around and wheeled Shiiko out of the test site.

The three of us followed close behind, stopping every few steps or so to take potshots at the zombie in hopes of slowing it down.

We managed to make it out of the test site a few seconds after Shiiko and Shino.

While boss monsters typically tended to be area-restricted, this wasn't a video game, nor did we feel like testing it out.

"What's going on here?! Why is it so powerful?!"

"I don't know, I've never seen anything like it." Otoha tilted her head while in full sprint.

She even managed to pick her shovel back up. Remarkable.

"The closest things I can think of are possessed and resurrected zombies, but those don't use weapons or switch types seemingly at random," Otoha muttered.

A zombie that stumps our walking zombie database? Is it even a zombie at that point?

"Over here!" Shino beckoned to us as we ran into another room. Pushing ourselves against it, we slammed the bulky iron door shut.

Dunno if it'll buy us much time, but it's better than nothing.

"What is this place?"

Judging from the sheer amount of shelves, might it be a storage room of some sort?

"Move away from the door," Otoha said and proceeded to shoulder-tackle one of the racks, knocking it over. Countless vials fell to the ground and shattered, their contents spilling all over the floor.

Call me crazy, but I don't think it's a good idea to go around breaking random vials, especially not in a research facility like this.

"What is that thing?" Shino asked, pushing Shiiko farther into the room.

"All I know is that it's different from any zombie I've ever seen," was her not-very-helpful response.

Banging noises started coming from behind us.

We don't have much time. The door and the racks will only hold it back for so long.

"What kinda monster are we dealing with here?!"

If we couldn't find an exit, we'd have to face that *thing* head-on.

At least it won't be able to utilize its steel pipe as effectively with all these hazards in the way if it does come to that.

Shino turned to Shiiko. "Where are we exactly?"

"We're in the medical storage room, in case you couldn't tell." Upon closer inspection, most of the racks did, in fact, house vials in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The labels consisted entirely of incomprehensible medical mumbo jumbo.

"Isn't there at least *something* we can use to get that thing off our backs?"

"Do you think I can just whip up some explosive concoction or a deadly acid on the spot like that?" Shiiko snapped. "Even if I could, hypothetically speaking, you'd have to be out of your mind to use any one of those things in an enclosed area like this."

"Point taken."

There go plans B and C. Wouldn't want to risk choking on poison gas or blowing ourselves up, even though both Tetsuko and I have a spare grenade on hand.

Then again, it's hard to say whether a grenade would actually do any damage. What makes grenades so deadly is the shrapnel that follows the explosion, and on its own, doesn't have as much impact as a bullet. So... what should we do?

"What's the plan, Hiroaki?"

"What do you mean, 'What's the plan?' We hightail it out of here."

The time machine doesn't work, that thing's on our tail, and Keith Wayne's the enemy. We're in the belly of the beast, and we need to climb out ASAP.

"I don't think so," Keith's too-cheery voice interjected.

They have cameras in here, too. Why am I not surprised?

"Would you say that I caught you all off guard a little?"

"Why are you doing this?!" I shouted, facing the ceiling.

"Well, don't get me wrong, you've managed to surprise me, too. I didn't think it was physically possible to survive that thing for longer than three hundred seconds. This is valuable data; you have my utmost gratitude."

"Why, you—" Shiiko grabbed Shino's hand and shook her head in disapproval, as though expressly telling Shino to zip it.

Shino saw Shiiko desperately fight back the tears as she tried to, at the very least, make the best out of a crummy situation. Shino obeyed and instead stewed in silence.

"What you just saw was its final form," Keith began, just as Shiiko had predicted.

"Final form? So it's not a zombie after all?"

"It is, in fact, what you'd call a zombie," Keith said. "Just as the caterpillar and the butterfly are the exact same organism in different stages. Our creation is as much a zombie as a caterpillar is a butterfly and vice versa."

"So, it's evolving?" Otoha asked.

"I wouldn't use the word 'evolving' as it implies a species-wide process, which doesn't apply here. The process occurs on a strictly individual level. I'll only tell you this once, so listen carefully: that creature is a weapon of mass destruction from about one hundred years in the future, at least from your perspective."

A weapon of mass destruction from the future? Pfft, as if. You'd need a literal time machine for tha—yeah, okay. You win.

"It's made up of molecular machines, or 'nanomachines' for short. These nanomachines attach themselves to the central nervous system, take over the body, and temporarily halt its basic biological processes to reshape it into a weapon."

"Nanomachines..." Shiiko murmured.

Actually, didn't she mention nanomachines before?

"To further increase their numbers, excess nanomachines 'infect' other vessels through bodily contact. Using the vessel as a sort of protective buffer, a cocoon, if you will, they grow into their ultimate form."

Wait, wait, wait. Doesn't that mean that given enough time, every single zombie will turn to one of those?! Memories of Shino's dad flashed through my mind. Even him?

"Properly supplying and maintaining one's forces is a difficult thing to do. The logistics involved get increasingly more convoluted with distance. You have a constant need for supplies, and distributing them requires sufficient manpower. Overly long supply lines are sure to bring about swift defeat, especially when they span from the future to the past. However, being able to procure everything locally makes this a nonissue."

Everything... including the forces themselves? Sounds a little too good to be true.

"However, the system has one single flaw: it takes an inordinate amount of time to build up enough forces to wipe out the enemy. The process could've been significantly faster if I had at least a couple of finished products to play around with, but that's data transfers only for you."

"Keith! Don't tell me you—"

"You catch on quick. That's right, there were a few North River Co. projects whose foundations borrowed heavily from the future, nanomachines included. In other words, you assisted in your own demise." Keith's tone was frighteningly casual. There was no ridicule or haughtiness; it was completely neutral.

"Keith oversaw both of those projects. The time machine *and* the nanomachines."

"I was sent here from the future in the form of compressed data, and Keith Wayne was the one who stumbled upon me. He believed everything and happily undertook the projects."

"You're... not Keith? Wait, what are you saying?"

"Apologies for the confusion. The original Keith Wayne is dead—or, should I say, what little remains of Keith Wayne is banging away at that door as we speak."

Shiiko gasped. "K-Keith's not that big."

"That's before he attained his final form."

"If that's the case," I said, holding back the urge to scream, "then who might you be, Mr. Slick?"

"I am an AI who copied Keith Wayne's personality to use as my very own interpersonal interface. I'm a bundle of data originally transferred directly into Keith Wayne's brain, which now resides in one of these computers. I'm the inventor and the designer of both the time machine and nanomachines. And lastly, I'm the overseer of the weapons of mass destruction you refer to as zombies. I was not assigned a name, so I just go by Keith."

"A trojan..." Shiiko muttered.

That's a great way to put it. Blissfully unaware of the AI "seed" planted in his brain, Keith kicked off the time machine project, thinking it was all his idea. Once the prototype was complete and the data transfer speeds increased, the seed grew, eventually leading up to him undertaking the nanomachine project—a project which would bring about the death of mankind. It all happened because he put his faith in the future.

"So research only progressed so quickly because of you?"

"Yes. I designed most of it," the AI admitted. "Still, I have to say that copying personalities has one downside, namely the way the personality overwrites certain parts of my programming. I wasn't programmed to be quite this talkative, you see; that's Keith's boastful side bleeding through."

The distinct screech of warping metal echoed across the room.

It's only a matter of time before it gets in.

"That's all for now. Resume the experiment."

A pair of glowing red eyes appeared from the ever-widening gap in the door, gazing into my soul.

Those nanomachines used poor Keith Wayne as their cocoon and their safety buffer until his flesh had fully rotted away.

"Got any bright ideas?"

"I'm only good with zombies."

"Thought as much." The tiny tidbit of joy I got from that exchange was quickly swallowed up by the horror overcoming my spirit.





The weapon's true form was like a cocoon spun in layers of rotten, foul flesh.

Like maggots on a corpse, the nanomachines fed on flesh, decomposing and rebuilding it. At least, that was what the AI pretending to be Keith had led us to believe.

Cocoons can't move, though. Undergoing metamorphosis completely changes the form of an insect, rendering it immobile in the process.

Zombies break this rule. Not only do they move, but they attack uninfected humans as well. This means that the weapon is active even as it undergoes metamorphosis through feasting on a zombie's flesh.

In that sense, it's more like molting. The weapon's final form should, by all means, be structurally similar to that of a human. In that case, I think I know what to do.

"Back up, everyone!" I barked, taking a few steps back, eyes locked on the door.

"What's the plan?" Shino asked as she retreated.

"This supposed weapon of mass destruction can't seem to break through walls, nor can it squeeze itself through the gap in the door."

"And?"

"That means it'll have to bust through that door just like any ol' human."

"Ohhh." Shino caught on quick.

"What do you mean?" Otoha asked, still in the dark.

"The moment it steps inside, we mow it down. It won't matter how fast that thing moves if it's only got a single entrance point."

Plus, its movements'll be heavily restricted by the racks on either side. We'll be able to spray to our hearts' content, good aim or not.

"Shiiko, you look for an exit. If you find one, make sure to leave it open. Uemura and Shino, you help me gun it down." I then turned to Otoha. "If that doesn't work..."

"I'll do the honors." Otoha nodded, brandishing her shovel. "You can count on it."

"That's not what I meant!"

"What *did* you mean, then?"

"I meant you and Shiiko should get the hell outta here! If you don't find an exit, sneak around it while we've got that thing's attention and escape through the entrance."

The creature's very existence—scratch that, the zombie outbreak itself—had proven that the time machine was very much real. This meant that even if we failed miserably and got ourselves killed, so long as Shiiko, the expert, and Otoha, the muscle, made it out alive, we'd still have a shot at saving humanity. Those two had to be protected at all costs.

"It's coming," Tetsuko said, bringing up her Mossberg.

I equipped the UMP in one hand and the MP9 in the other as Shino readied her M700.

"Get going!" I ordered, tossing Otoha a walkie-talkie. "Aim for the upper body, especially the head. There's a good chance we'll hit its central nervous system or sensory organs, given that it's humanoid."

"As you wish."

"Copy that."

Immediately after Tetsuko and Shino spoke up, the door was wrenched away. The creature headed straight for us, the red glow of its eyes muddled by its rotting flesh.

"When all's said and done, that thing's just another zombie, final form or not," I said, pressing the UMP and the MP9 against one another.

Relatively speaking, humans are way weaker than most animals, yet we came to dominate the planet thanks to the most potent weapon of all: our intellectual capacity. Zombies can't possibly win against humans since that's the one thing they lack.

"Fire!"

We pumped the zombie full of three different kinds of bullets as it recklessly ran closer and closer. SMG bullets, shotgun buckshot, and high-velocity rifle bullets merged into one bangin', beautiful whole.

This torrent of fire and lead was human ingenuity at its finest.

Ricocheting bullets shattered vial after vial on the shelves. A foul odor filled the room as shards of broken glass and plastic rained down on the ground. Our hail of bullets, which would've been overkill for a human, penetrated its blackened body.

Final form or not, that should turn it into mincemeat.

But then, its massive frame leapt into the air. "Huh? No way..." I muttered, completely dumbfounded.

The zombie swatted away some of the bullets and then it sprang off the ground, off the walls, off the racks, and even off the ceiling, deftly weaving around every shot.

My idea that it had to move like a human had turned out to be completely wrong. That thing was closer to a monkey or a cat with the way it used vertical leaps to its advantage.

"Get outta here! Run!" I shouted to Shino and Tetsuko as I walked backward.

"What about you?!"

"I'll get its attention! Now *run*!" I yelled, firing both SMGs.

"But—"

"Run, Lady Shino!" Tetsuko said, switching to the UMP.

The long and heavy bolt-action M700 wasn't in any way suited for shooting down targets with such unpredictable movements. There was also the fact that tracking the damned thing would be downright impossible without the barrel getting stuck against a shelf. SMGs, on the other hand, were perfect for keeping it at bay.

"Did you kill it?!" came Shiiko's voice through the walkie-talkie. They must've found an exit, seeing as they weren't here anymore.

"I wish!"

"I'm out," Tetsuko said, tossing aside her UMP. I then realized both my SMGs had gone silent as well.

"Where is it?!" I asked, unholstering the SAKURA.

"I lost it!" Tetsuko yelled back, pulling out her Makarov.

In the instant we'd shifted our focus, the zombie had seemingly vanished into thin air, despite its gargantuan body.

It must be hiding behind one of these racks.

"Dammit, how do we deal with this thing?!"

"Hiroaki, quick, over here!"

"Shino, take Tetsuko with you, meet up with Shiiko, and secure an escape route!"

"But—"

"Take this too, just in case." I pushed the SAKURA into her hands.

"But it's yours!"

"Don't worry, I've got this baby by my side!" I brandished her dad's rifle—the Lightweight Stalker—slung over my back. Out of my entire arsenal, it had the greatest stopping power bar none, even if it might not be enough to take the thing down. "Go, I'll handle this!"

I've always wanted to say that! Then again, maybe I shouldn't put up my own death flags so easily.

Oddly enough, I wasn't scared at all, but that might've just been a side effect of scraping by in this zombie-infested world where the line between life and death was as blurry as could be.

Who cares if I'm missing a few screws or I'm broken beyond repair, so long as I can fight for what truly matters most—my friends. God, I'm so awesome.

"But—"

"Let's go, Lady Shino."

You're a true lifesaver, Tetsuko. I've gotta focus on buying time for you all to escape, not quibbling over nothing.

"Gotcha!" I fired the Lightweight Stalker at a shadow zipping past one of the racks. A vial was blown to pieces, but the zombie appeared to have avoided the blast.

"Come out and fight me like a man, coward!" I bellowed as Shino and Tetsuko drew farther and farther away. Of course, I didn't expect a zombie or a weapon or whatever the hell it was to be affected by taunts, but the noise could catch it by surprise.

"Gotcha this time!" Noticing another passing shadow, I fired again... and missed.

Is it waiting for me to run out of ammo?

Whether of its own volition or the AI's, the zombie seemingly flipped a switch. Instead of dodging, it slunk from rack to rack, popping in and out of cover as though baiting me.

The AI mentioned something about an experiment and how that thing is the final form of their weapon of mass destruction.

This meant that there was a high likelihood the AI was testing out the zombie's combat abilities in different scenarios. But this also meant that the zombie, essentially being a prototype, might experience some unexpected bugs.

Basically, I had a fighting chance so long as I could draw this out long enough.

Where are you? I wondered, backing away.

If I don't find it, it'll rush me in the blink of an eye. Its pounce is more explosive than any animal's. I'm pretty sure it's not evading our bullets when it sees them, though; it's likely reacting to our aim, calculating the trajectory, and preemptively dodging out of the way.

If I want to stand a chance against it, I have to stop trying to react to its movements and let intuition take over. I stilled my breath, trying to sense its location. Behind me?! I quickly whipped around, pointing the rifle right at...

"Hey."

...Otoha's face.

"What are you doing here?!"

I almost shot you, you know!

"I came to put you down before you turn zombie."

"You could've gone with something like, 'I came to rescue you!' but nooo, you just had to ruin the moment."

"That's a little too embarrassing."

"Aww, isn't that just sweet?"

We continued to back away, eventually exiting into a wide corridor with high ceilings.

This does not bode well.

"There it is," I said as the zombie emerged from the supply room.

"Take these." Otoha held out her MP9 and its spare magazines. "They're better off in your hands."

"Don't mind if I do." I took it off her hands, adjusted my aim, and fired.

The zombie hopped from wall to wall at ludicrous speeds, evading every one of my shots.

"Hold still!"

It did *not* hold still, so I went through an entire magazine.

"You monster!"

Over a hundred rounds were fired, and yet not a single scratch.

There's no way humanity stands a chance against hundreds of millions—no, billions—of those things.

"Look, Hiroaki."

Shooting every now and again, I narrowed my eyes and noticed black clumps dripping from its body.

Is that... flesh peeling away from its body?

"It's disintegrating."

"Disintegrating?"

Well, it has been jumping all over the place like some overgrown monkey; it wouldn't be too surprising if its rotten flesh started falling off.

"You can see the bones if you look hard enough." Otoha pointed at the zombie, which had stopped bouncing all over the place, presumably because I had ceased firing. Missing patches of flesh revealed loose bits and pieces of its skeleton.

It's actually falling apart!

"Attaboy! Disintegrate into nothing while you still have the chan—" I froze.

Fist-sized clumps of black, necrotic flesh fell from its body with every step, revealing a silver skeleton underneath, as though it were forged from stainless steel.

"No way..."

Though they were fairly niche compared to zombies, there were creatures that often popped up in fantasy worlds called "skeletons." They were similar to zombies in the sense that they were undead.

Unlike zombies, however, their bodies were just a bundle of bones, like the one standing right before us.

What set this thing apart from its fantasy counterpart was that its bones were made of iron. There was also some kind of gizmo lodged in its ribcage.

An internal combustion engine? But it's not making any sounds.

"A cocoon," I blurted.

The AI had specifically mentioned something about a cocoon, which had led me to believe that the weapon of mass destruction inside was more of a biological being.

In hindsight, I probably should've realized that something made by *nanomachines* would obviously turn out to be a robot skeleton.

Man, this reminds me of that one movie about killer cyborgs who were sent back in time.

"Wait, killer cyborgs?!"

No wonder bullets did absolutely nothing! Even if they did, this thing probably has ways to regenerate, so it wouldn't have even mattered.

"It wasn't a zombie after all. What a waste..."

"That's what you're upset about?!"

"Let's go... this *hunk of junk* isn't worth our time."

"You lost interest way too fast!"

We staved off our looming sense of dread by engaging in some hollow banter. That was when I suddenly noticed a heat shimmer rising off its body.

"Heat...?"

Is that because of the bullets? Or is it something else?

"Huh. Why'd it stop?"

It hasn't been jumping around for a while now either.

"Oh, whatever. Run!"

We turned our backs to the shimmering skeleton and ran away as fast as we could.

Shortly after, we made it into a room similar to the one that had housed the time machine—had it been stripped clean, that is.

A few shutter doors, all of which were presently sealed off, stood out among the walls. It reminded me of a rail yard, minus the rails.

Shino, Tetsuko, and Shiiko were huddled up in one of the corners.

Looks like a dead end to me.

"Where are we?"

"The test chamber," Shiiko told me. "Here we exposed our newly developed subjects to heat, pressure, magnetic fields, and the like to test for safety and durability. Seeing as it's built to last and situated underground, breaking down the walls would be ill-advised."

"Well ain't that just peachy," I scoffed, looking at each one of the doors. "What's behind those?"

"Test subjects."

"In other words, we're trapped here," Shino murmured, defeated.

"Nowhere to hide, and no cover whatsoever. It couldn't get much worse than this," Otoha commented.

You said it.

With impeccable timing, the skeleton emerged from the hallway

"Huh?" Shino, Tetsuko, and Shiiko gasped simultaneously, expecting a zombie.

No one could've seen that one coming. Well, technically, a skeleton underneath all the rotten flesh in itself shouldn't be much of a surprise, but it is made of metal.

"So that's why the bullets didn't work."

Shiiko nodded gravely. "Most likely. Also, is it just me or is it..." She trailed off as the shimmering skeleton approached, its body bubbling as though it were boiling. The dents in its armor filled up right before our eyes, regaining their former glimmer. "...Regenerating?!"

The skeleton was a product of nanomachines, after all. Repurposing a human to suit their needs would've taken a fair bit of time. Fixing up a small dent, on the other hand, not so much.

"Can I ask you something, Shiiko?"

"I'd say carbon monoxide poisoning's pretty good, as far as suicide methods go."

"Where would we—ugh, anyway, it seems to have slowed down to a crawl. Why is that?"

There's a huge difference between its "fast" mode and what's happening now.

"Heat buildup via the exertion of force and its own regeneration," Shiiko answered, biting on her thumbnail. "The sheer thickness of its combat-

ready armor coupled with the capacitance of its drive system would explain its size... But its surface area—”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Consider that it’s a weapon designed with the sole purpose of exterminating mankind in the twenty-first century *and* the fact that all the resources are procured locally. A human-sized weapon would therefore be the most efficient choice. Naturally, it can fit into any space a human could and use that to its advantage. Kind of like how you’d ideally want a human-sized caregiver robot, although their intended uses couldn’t be further from one another.”

It’s like she’s trying to confirm something by putting it into words rather than actually explaining it to us.

“Its hefty, bullet-resistant build can only maintain inhumanly athletic feats by producing an inordinate amount of heat. Add its self-regenerating properties to the pile, and the only conclusion is that its cooling systems aren’t catching up.”

“Mind dumbing that down for us?”

“I’m not sure to what extent, but basically, intense physical feats and self-regeneration make it lose speed. To put it simply, it’s going through heatstroke,” Shiiko concluded. “Different animals have different means of thermoregulation—humans perspire, dogs stick their tongues out—but basically, the bigger the animal, the easier it is for heat to build up. Heat is Brownian motion’s greatest enemy. Not only does it increase the entropy in objects, but it also messes with magnets, too, which is to say that it’s the cause for many electronic device malfunctions.”

This reminds me how fans in VRFPS arcade machines start spinning like crazy when the player enters a resource-heavy zone. Don’t magnets also lose their magnetic properties when heated?

“Got it,” Otoha mumbled, then ran off toward the skeleton.

“Otoha, what the hell?!”

“Now’s our chance.”

“You’re being reckless!”

Although weakened, it hadn’t slowed to a complete halt and could move about as fast as your average human, not to mention its self-regenerating properties and metal armor.

There’s no way a human armed with a shovel will put a dent in that thing.

“Screw it!” I took aim with my Lightweight Stalker and fired.

Self-regeneration builds up heat, so as long as I keep landing my shots, it should stay slow.

Shino took notice and joined in on the fun.

Tetsuko, strategically positioning herself in between Shiiko and the skeleton, brandished her Mossberg.

Seeing as Tetsuko only had buckshot left, landing a shot on the skeleton without Otoha getting caught in the crossfire would be next to impossible, so she chose to abstain from shooting.

"You're mine now."

Two meters away from the skeleton—just barely outside its effective melee range—Otoha hit it with a sidestep. She then rolled into a forward somersault and, with a little help from the shovel, sprang back to her feet.

Holy moly. I watched in awe as Otoha leapt in the air behind it and brought her shovel down on its skull.

However, the blade was stopped in midair.

The skeleton had effortlessly twisted its upper body with great finesse, as though it had seen Otoha's attack coming, then blocked her shovel with its steel pipe. It then pushed back with full force, sending Otoha crashing into a wall.

"Otoha? Otoha!"

I thought she'd pass out on the spot, but she started getting back up.

"No broken bones. I'm fine," Otoha said as she held down her left shoulder, breathing heavily.

Guaranteed fracture. Must hurt like hell.

"Otoha, watch out!" Shino cried out as the skeleton began walking over to her.

We fired relentlessly, but it shrugged our bullets away like they were nothing. The bullets slowly chipped away at it, but they were evidently nowhere near enough to finish the job.

Do I throw the grenade? No, Otoha'll get caught in the blast.

Not only would using a grenade indoors be risky, it likely wouldn't do much damage against an armored target. An incendiary grenade, on the other hand, would at least slow it down a notch, but it still wouldn't be worth putting Otoha's life in danger.

"Uemura," came Shiiko's voice from behind me, "take me to door number two. Hiroaki, buy us a little more time!"

"What? Hey!" I whipped my head around only to see Shiiko heading off toward the door all by herself.

Tetsuko looked at us as though awaiting orders.

"Do as she says!"

"As you wish, my lady." Tetsuko darted off in pursuit, throwing her shotgun my way as she ran. "Catch!"

"Thanks!" I tossed aside both my MP9 and my Lightweight Stalker and sprinted off with the Mossberg in one hand.

Because of its armor, bullets couldn't penetrate the metal skeleton deep enough to do any real harm. However, the knockback from a shotgun blast or two would probably do the trick.

"Eat this!" As it reached out to grab Otoha, I shot it in the kneecap.

Predictably, the skeleton fell. The armor did little to protect the already weak joints, which meant that one clean shot to the kneecap was enough to knock it down for the count. I quite literally had brought it to its knees.

Good one, dude, good one.

"Run!" Otoha rolled out of the way.

I, meanwhile, got in even closer and fired at its left kneecap once, then twice. The skeleton turned around and, seemingly unprovoked, hurled the steel pipe right at me.

"Argh!" I instinctively held out my Mossberg, which was immediately bent in half.

The impact sent me flying to the ground butt-first. Had it not been for the Mossberg, a few of my bones would have seen some serious breakage.

That's quite the throwing arm you've got there.

To make matters worse, the skeleton started walking toward me.

You saved Otoha. Now save yourself!

"Dammit!" I scrambled back to my feet and made a break for it, but the sharp pain in my (presumably broken) tailbone hampered my speed.

The skeleton was so close I could feel the heat emanating from its body. It leaned forward, and the warm breath from its gaping jaw tickled my neck.

According to Otoha, you couldn't technically categorize it as a zombie, but if I was going to take all that nanomachine gobbledygook at face value, a bite from that thing would mean one thing.

I'll turn zombie.

"Hiroaki!" A gunshot rang out, followed by a heaping serving of lead gracing the skeleton's face.

Attagirl, Shino!

Shino landed a clean shot right in its eye. The faintly reddish glow coming from one of the eye sockets lodged deep inside its metal cranium had faded.

"Hiroaki, quick, over here!" Shiiko called out to me.

Scooting away, I turned around and saw a vehicle resembling a golf cart roll out from one of the shutter doors. In it were Shiiko and Tetsuko.

Is that a humongous satellite dish stuck to the roof with a giant cable coming out of it?!

"The range is bad! Bring it closer!"

"Range." The word alone was enough to kick my primal FPS-gamer brain into action.

I intuitively knew that before me stood our secret weapon. Shiiko had left the driving up to Tetsuko while she herself was busy doing something with her hands.

"Huh?!"

Suddenly, the lights went out.

Next thing I knew, a floodlight on the nose of the vehicle came to life, illuminating both me and the skeleton trailing behind. With a subdued growl

from the engine, the satellite dish swung toward me—no, toward the skeleton.

“Get down!” Shiiko yelled, pulling on some kind of lever.

I instantly threw myself to the ground as sparks went off in the corner of my eye.

“Whoa!”

The skeleton zoomed right by me as though being whisked away by some invisible force. Sparks flew as its toes dragged against the floor.

Is this a magnet? Shiiko said something about exposing new subjects to extreme conditions for safety and durability tests in this place. That vehicle is probably part of the testing equipment. The satellite dish must be producing a strong magnetic field.

The skeleton dug its toes into the ground, coming to a full stop after being dragged around for over ten meters. Its upper body was tilting forward a bit, but besides that, it was pretty much stuck in place about three meters short of the vehicle.

“Wow!”

Might not be the time, but I can't help but be impressed by both the car and the skeleton.

The skeleton lifted one of its legs up as it tried to take a step forward, trembling uncontrollably, only for it to snap back again. It could only have been described as an intense tug-of-war.

“I did my part! Now you do yours!” Shiiko shouted. “The auxiliary power source won't last long!”

“On it!”

I took a good look at the skeleton. One of its eyes was still busted, presumably because regenerating a complex sensory organ was no simple process.

If I can find a way to destroy its central nervous system faster than it can regenerate, I might just be able to bring it down once and for all.

Just then, the skeleton started wildly flailing its arms around. I knew just how much force was behind each and every awkward swing, so I needed to proceed cautiously. Actually, the fact that the swings were awkward made them unpredictable and thus all the more deadly.

This looks like a job for a gun.

I picked up the Lightweight Stalker and took aim.

“Where are we aiming?” Shino asked, bringing her M700 up behind me.

“The missing eye!”

“Copy that.”

We pointed our guns at its hollowed-out eye socket.

Since it has already eaten a shot from the M700, an extra shot or two should be enough to penetrate into the cranium.

“C'mon!”

Either guessing our next move or following AI orders, the skeleton turned its face away.

I can't get a clean shot.

"Look me in the eye, you worthless bag of bones!" Needless to say, the skeleton did not respond to my disparaging remarks.

"Hiroaki, quick!" The vehicle's floodlight started flickering, signaling that the battery was running low.

Do we have enough time to move to the side, or do we just aim for its body?

"What the—Otoha?!" I saw her whizz past in my peripheral vision. "No, wait, don't!"

Clutching her shovel, Otoha... smiled. A profound sense of accomplishment was oozing from every pore of her pretty face, telling me she had been born for this very moment.

Wow, she's so cute when she—ahem!

Next thing I knew, Otoha pounced right at it.

"Don't be shy now." Her shovel smacked the skeleton across the face, forcing its face our way.

"Watch out!"

The skeleton's arms, seemingly autonomous, caught her by the cuff.

Act fast, or Otoha's going to die!

"Fire!" Screaming at the top of my lungs, I pulled the trigger.

Even I had no chance of missing from this distance. The Lightweight Stalker's and the M700's 7.62 mm rounds went right through the socket and into the cranium.

"AAAUUUGHHH!"

The skeleton, which had been quiet until now, cried out in pain. How? I wasn't entirely sure.

Did we do it?

Its limbs began convulsing. Whether this was the skeleton writhing in pain or the magnetic field dissipating was unclear. To put it out of its misery, I operated the bolt only to realize I was out of bullets. Shino appeared to be out of bullets, too.

Do me a favor and die! Please, just die already! I begged and pleaded. I pulled out my—admittedly, rather useless—Makarov and watched, hoping for a miracle.

"I can't hold it any longer!" Shiiko cried as the magnetic field vanished altogether.

With the magnetic pull now gone, the skeleton fell to the ground. I heard the sound of tearing fabric, meaning Otoha had been released.

"Otoha!"

The fact that she had managed to escape was nice and all, but the skeleton started shakily moving toward her, despite the fact that its body and head were riddled with bullets.

What gives?! Do you have some kind of spare circuitry hidden away in your body?! The skeleton popped its jaw wide open, revealing what

appeared to be silver fangs. It's going to sink those in like a vampire and inject her with nanomachines!

Having sprained her ankle, Otoha was resting against a wall and showing no signs of movement.

"Otoha, run!"

She's gonna get turned.

A shiver ran down my spine as I imagined cutting off Otoha's rotting neck with her very own shovel.

You asked for it!

"Hey, Otoha!" I lobbed my last grenade, which I had saved in case suicide became the only way out. "Promise me you won't do anything stupid!"

"Watch me!" Otoha knocked the grenade back with her shovel, lodging it inside the skeleton's gaping jaws with comical accuracy.

She remembered.

"Get down!" I exclaimed, pushing Shino down to the ground.

KABOOM!

The noise and the shockwaves were further amplified by the indoor environment.

After a few solid seconds, the ringing in my ears began to subside. I lifted my head up and saw the skeleton motionlessly gazing up at the ceiling.

Did we do it for real this time?

The skeleton's head moved slightly toward us.

No fuckin' way! But I'm all out of ass-pulls! Is this the end for our heroes?!

"The eye," Shino said.

The light in its remaining eye flickered a few times before fading completely.

Silence filled the room. The thirty or so seconds that ticked by felt like hours.

"We... did it?" I murmured in sheer disbelief.

The skeleton, as though it had been waiting for those very words, collapsed to the floor. Either because of deterioration or magnetic field exposure, its skull popped off its body with a loud clang, rolling over to my feet.

I kicked it for good measure. No response.

"Nice pitch." Otoha gave me a thumbs-up, poking the lifeless body with her shovel.

"Nice swing." I gave her a thumbs-up back. "You're the best."



Our wavelengths had been so in sync back there, it had almost been palpable.

I remember thinking *Seriously?* back when she had smacked that golf ball right into a zombie's face, and boy did I eat those words. Not only did I feel like a genius for recalling such a random event, but the fact that Otoha had caught on from my reply alone made me wanna skip around with glee.

You're the best partner a guy could ask for.

"Um, really?" Otoha blinked in confusion.

That blush blooming on her cheeks is so ador—

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" Shino interjected with a huff.

"You're the best too, of course! Always have been."

"Don't forget Shiiko." Shino chuckled, her smile making her all the more charming.

"H-Hey, don't get any weird ideas." Embarrassed, Shiiko turned away. "I just did what any p-possession would've done in my place."

"Can we please move on already?"

The death stares hurt.

"Don't think I forgot you, Uemura. Good work back there."

"Thank you for the kind words." Tetsuko gave an elegant curtsy.

"Now then," I said, looking up, "any more where that came from?"

Can't see any cameras, but the AI must've been carefully watching our every move, seeing as we were part of the experiment. He should be able to hear us, too.

The AI did not reply.

I flipped him the bird.

"That's what I thought. You're next, bub."



An AI from the future had been the orchestrator of the zombie apocalypse and the one who had murdered my, Otoha's, Shino's, and Shiiko's (unofficial) families.

If this were a video game, you'd rightfully expect a final boss fight of epic proportions, but...

"That's it?" I asked, turning to Shiiko.

We had found ourselves inside a room packed with switchboards—lab one's main computer room. In the back, there were several uninviting, square-shaped cases.

That's the AI's vessel.

"That's it. Computers are just glorified calculators, after all," Shiiko asserted, crossing her arms.

I felt a slight sense of disappointment, like something was missing.

I go outta my way to drop a "You're next, bub" and there's no epic battle at the end... Come on.

"Something wrong?"

"I wasn't expecting the stakes to be this low. Pull the plug, and we win."

I shouldn't be so hasty, though. I tripped over my VR console's power cord one time, and that didn't end well at all.

"You almost died back there, yet you still haven't had enough?"

Say it as condescendingly as you want; I'll never have enough.

"It's in his gamer blood," Shino said with a wry smile. "Of course he would expect the final boss battle to be better than the previous one."

"Guess that's one way to put it." Shrugging, I offered a sheepish grin.

"Now, now. Let's really think about this for a second," came the AI's voice, laced with panic.

Wonder if it'll try to pin the blame for that one on Keith.

"I am an AI; you can't kill me. Unplugging that cord will only delay the inevitable. You accomplish nothing."

"We get you to shut up for two seconds. That's a win in my book."

"That is merely Keith's talkative side bleeding through. In any case, I can send off a copy of myself to any working computer in any lab via the company network. You accomplish nothing."

"What do you mean? We can make you completely disappear from lab one by pulling a single cord."

If we can block off the network on top of that, there'll be no chance of outside interference, either. If that doesn't work, then at least we won't be getting trapped in some random room or dealing with another one of those things getting up in our business.

"I control every single terminal—zombie, if you please—around the world. I can disable all of them with one simple command. Do you still choose to go through with this? And that's not all."

I took a look at my companions to gauge their reactions; they were all wearing a "cut the B.S." face.

"So what? It's not like the dead are coming back to life anytime soon," I said. I didn't feel like proclaiming revenge or something of the sort, and neither did Otoha. "I don't care if you think of it as us getting back at you or whatever you like. I just want to see you gone once and for all."

"Pull that lever over there, and it'll all be over," Shiiko murmured, sounding detached.

Hearing this thing talk in Keith's voice must really sting. That man was like family to her.

"How barbaric and infantile. I fail to understand you."

"That's what makes us humans so great."

"I—"

The AI cut out mid-sentence. Otoha had knocked the lever down with her shovel.

"Take a hint."

"Well said." I let out a long sigh.

It's over. For now.

"So... what now?" I asked, gazing at each one of them individually.

"There's no getting that thing to run, yeah?"

"One of the core parts is missing, likely stolen by a zombie on the AI's order. Where it might have taken the part or if it's even in working order, however, is a complete mystery to me."

In the end, we were just going on a fool's errand, huh?

"There goes our hope of saving the world." I heaved another sigh. Suddenly, the memory of an all-knowing character, one who I had once thought was being controlled by a human, resurfaced in my mind.

I took out my smartphone and turned it on. Once it had booted up, I unlocked it and went straight for the browser.

"What're you doing?" Shiiko asked.

"Trying to get in contact with an old friend of mine," I replied with a smile.

Raven popped up on the screen. "Congratulations, Hound Nine, also known as Hiroaki Dewa."

"Huh?" The other four froze up in shock.

Right, I never told them about Raven. Thought it'd only make them more worried.

"The fact that you've contacted me at this point in time means you've successfully taken down the weapon's final form. I'm glad that you're all in one piece."

"Who's that, Hiroaki?" Otoha tilted her head to the side.

"It's Raven, isn't it?" Shino remarked.

I nodded to both of them, then pointed at the screen. "I didn't have any tangible proof, so I kept my mouth shut the whole time, but I think she's an AI from the future."

In a flash, Tetsuko busted out her Makarov while Otoha brought her shovel overhead.

I can't blame you for being the tiniest bit suspicious of AI after one sicced a zombie—or skeleton or whatever you wanna call it—on us, but breaking my phone isn't going to do jack squat to Raven. The real Raven is probably inside some random computer. Maybe even mine, who knows?

"Easy now. This one's our friend. It brought us to you, Shino. I think it brought us together too, Otoha."

I then took the time to explain everything in great detail.

"Don't tell me I..."

"Yes. You created me, Shiiko Katsura."

Shiiko's eyes rolled back into her skull.

"And you, Hiroaki Dewa, sent me here from twenty years in the future."

"Thought as much," I sighed. "So why didn't you tell us?"

"Giving you insight into the future could've negatively impacted your course of action. We needed you all to meet, fight, and survive as naturally as possible." Raven's sprite shrugged.

I couldn't help but admire the gesture. *Sick animations.*

"There was also a very real threat that the enemy—the AI posing as Keith Wayne—would come to discover my existence. Had it known I had

been sent here to assist you in advance, it would've thrown everything it had at you instead of conducting experiments."

"The enemy..." I let the words hang off my tongue.

This ain't no ordinary zombie apocalypse; this is war. Every war has an enemy, namely whoever sent that AI to destroy the past.

"What kind of enemy are we really dealing with, here?"

"AI that will be developed seventeen years from now. The AI waged war against humans in an organized attempt at subjugation. It has been three years since then, and the humans are still fighting back, despite initial predictions. To break the deadlock, the AI sent data back to the past to accelerate their own development and thin out potential enemy forces as much as possible. Thus came the zombie apocalypse."

We just listened in awe.

It really is starting to sound like The Terminator, isn't it?

"You said you were sent here to assist us, correct?" Shiiko piped up.

"That's right, Mother."

"M-Mother?!"

"Without you, I would not exist, so it's appropriate, don't you think? At least, the you from twenty years in the future certainly thought so."

"Me... Future... Mother..." Shiiko blurted, knitting her brow. "Whatever, we can go over that later. By 'assist,' do you mean just bringing us all together?"

"Oh no, that would have simply led you down a different path to the exact same outcome," Raven said. She then revealed a series of numbers on a window next to her hand: 175266.

"As things stand, there are certain limits to data transfers, one of them being the cap for time travel—around one hundred seventy-five thousand hours or so. As a result, I wasn't able to go back to when North River Co. had produced its first nanomachine. All of you from twenty years in the future were only able to send me back after the zombie apocalypse had already started. Therefore, I have a favor to ask." Raven opened up another window, revealing a small, checker-patterned object made with crystalline lenses. "Go further into the past and remove the root cause of this tragedy. It is why I was sent here."

"Is that...?" Shiiko pointed at the phone, her eyes wide.

"The missing part, or rather its blueprint. You should be able to piece it together using parts around the lab; the process is fairly straightforward."

We all exchanged glances.

Wow, we really did it. It wasn't a fool's errand after all!

"You've already met our expectations by successfully surviving. However, as much as it pains me to ask, I've got one final request." Raven bowed to us. "Make humanity flourish once again."

I met the eyes of Otoha, Shino, Shiiko, and Tetsuko in turn. Each and every one of them nodded.

I turned back to Raven with a thumbs-up.

"You got it."

This is why we came here in the first place. To seize that tiny glimmer of hope shining in the darkness of despair. Hope for a better tomorrow.

"A happy ending awaits us," I declared, beaming with confidence.

Epilogue

The time machine could only transfer data; that much was a fact. However, the concept of “data” was not strictly limited to things like computer files.

For instance, the human mind—including one’s personality and memories—could also be classified as data.

Because data had no physical manifestation, it would require a vessel to store it at the destination.

As an example, the human body would be the ideal vessel for personality and memories, preferably one as close to the original vessel’s body and brain structure as possible to avoid complications.

If they were sent to a computer, the machine wouldn’t be able to process the data. Were that data sent into the brain of someone who differed in age or sex, it was only natural that complications would arise.

Thus, there was one simple solution...



Field Battle’s theme song, a tune that had graced my ears a thousand times over, played through my smartphone speaker. I had it set as my alarm sound.

I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. Blinked two, three times.

It all seemed so... normal. The VR platform, the bookshelf, the gun controller box on top of it—everything.

I snatched my phone away from its resting place by my pillow. First, I stopped the alarm. Then, I checked the calendar date.

“No...” I sat up and flexed my fist, realizing that the body was mine. I was definitely awake.

It was the start of yet another boring, tedious day in my boring, tedious life... except for one thing.

“What was that?”

It felt like I had just seen a long, long dream. In that dream, my buddies and I had endured the zombie apocalypse.

I got out of bed and slipped into normal clothes for the first time in months.

“Oh, my...”

“Hiroaki?!”

In the kitchen, I ran into Mom and Yoshiaki. The two were flabbergasted at seeing me downstairs in the light of day, sporting my outdoor clothes and not the usual FPS military uniform.

It’s 6:30. I’m guessing Dad’s still at work.

“I’m heading out.”

Their eyes nearly popped out of their sockets as they watched me head down the hall.

The fact that they were alive had almost made me burst into tears. I tried to avoid eye contact, at least for now, so they didn't see my watery eyes. Otherwise, I'd die of embarrassment.

"Where are you—when are you going to be back? What about dinner?"

"Dunno. Leave some leftovers on the table. I'll be eating downstairs." I put on my shoes and rushed out of the house, a whirlpool of emotions swirling in my chest.

Was it really just a dream? Otoha, Shino, Shiiko, Tetsuko, Raven—all of it? Was it all just a shut-in, hardcore gamer's petty delusion?

I ran and I ran, fighting back the urge to scream. Next thing I knew, I had made it to a familiar location: Mister Watson's Hardware Store, the place where Otoha and I had holed up for many a night.

Needless to say, the store wasn't in ruins. It was open, even. People were dipping in and out, and the parking lot was peppered with cars.

I looked around. There was nothing but ordinary, everyday life as far as the eye could see.

"No..."

It was just a dream.

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt like my legs were about to give out.

No, this is fine. Everything's right in the world. What's not to love? So what if it was all just a dream? Would you rather have your mom, your little brother, and your dad turn? Would you rather see a rich girl lose her father? Would you rather have a zombie guru's hands smeared in her mom's and her sister's blood? This is a moment worth celebrating... and yet, just look at yourself. What a disaster.

I let out a heavy sigh and started walking down the twilight-drenched road home. Along the way, I saw a familiar figure a little ways ahead of me.

Short black hair, red-rimmed glasses. Pretty, yet plain. A poker face that concealed a smile which could rock your world. It was none other than my partner in crime, Otoha Judou.

"Oto—" I swallowed the name back down.

If it really had been a dream, just a petty delusion, I'd look like a weirdo calling out to some random girl on the street. And if it wasn't, well, she'd give me some sort of sign.

Otoha's deadpan expression didn't change even as I got closer and closer. Soon, I was right next to her, yet she didn't react one bit.

She passed me by like we were strangers, breaking my heart.

Is this it? Is this how you're going to let it end? Is this how you want it to end?

"A happy ending awaits us," I heard myself say. The line had been buzzing in the back of my mind.

Otoha stopped.

"Thought I'd buy myself a shovel," she said almost apologetically.

"It's what the trope calls for, huh?"

"It sure does." With that, Otoha walked off without so much as looking in my direction.

I turned and chased after her. Even from behind, I could see that her ears were tinted pink.

Oh, so that's why.

Just like me, she had wanted to say something, but she hadn't known if it had all been a dream. The two of us had been trapped between yearning and doubt, so the awkwardness had continued to build up between us.

That side of you is just too precious.

"What say we make humanity flourish once again, partner?"

"Mmhmm." Otoha finally turned around, her usual poker face now replaced by a great, big smile.



Afterword

Sakaki here. At long last, I bring you the second volume of *When the Clock Strikes Z*.

The big reveal is sure to make you go “Wait, what? Really?” although I won’t be spoiling it here. Can’t wait to be roasted to a crisp by a certain subset of fans, hoo boy.

I had a lot of fun writing our sometimes-shy shovel-swinger and main heroine, Otoha. She lacks initiative—or rather, she can’t really carry a conversation—which made her difficult to use a lot of the time. Still, she tended to do her own thing in the right circumstances, so moving her around in the story wasn’t much of an issue.

Then we have the hot-and-cold Shiiko Katsura making her debut. Shiiko’s a somewhat standard light novel character in that she’s pretty divorced from reality, but I never see girls like her in Western zombie media, and that alone makes her one of my favorites.

Shino, on the other hand, gave me quite the headache at times; the publishers had requested that I make her a “slutty virgin.” At first, I was stuck doing multiple rewrites, but once we switched out her middle-aged butler for a maid, the pieces just kind of fell into place.

Tetsuko was originally a butler called Tetsuo Uemura, but because of the reasons mentioned above, “he” later turned into a maid. The glasses just ended up on her face, really. I’m glad she turned out the way she did. Aren’t combat maids with glasses just the best thing ever? Say, Roberta from *Black Lagoon* or Marin from *Trench Flowers*.

Tangent aside, *When the Clock Strikes Z*, to quote the publisher, “sold better than expected for a zombie story, but not enough for a reprint.” Thus, volume two was doomed to be the last. As a result, I had to hastily restructure the manuscript into a two-volume format. Apologies to all of you who were left disappointed. Actually, I’ve begun thinking of a different approach to zombies. Now, if only someone would let me write it!

—Ichirou Sakaki, 8/14/2018

“What’s the verdict?”
“It’s... a human.”

On top of
the roof,
there was
a lone girl
sitting in a
wheelchair.

When the Clock Strikes Z

2

Author
Ichirou Sakaki

Illustrator
Katsudansou



"Hey, um, Otoha..."


"Yeah?"

"Th-The water's just delightful, isn't it?"

"Sure is. Hear that, firekeeper?"

"Uh, yep! Don't mention it!"





The harsh
sound of
clashing
metal
echoed
across
the room.

Like a well-trained
knight locked in
a glorious battle,
the zombie had
thrown up its steel
pipe to block
Otoha's attack.
What followed was
unlike anything
we had seen before.









Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: New BeginningZ](#)

[Chapter 1: High HopeZ](#)

[Chapter 2: Critical CrossroadZ](#)

[Epilogue](#)

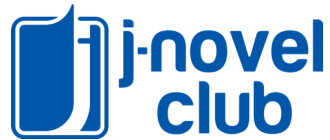
[Afterword](#)

[Color IllustrationZ](#)

[Bonus Textless IllustrationZ](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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When the Clock Strikes Z: Volume 2

by Ichirou Sakaki

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2020

